
On Furlough

By Florence Olmstead



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FLORENCE OLMSTEAD

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ON FURLOUGH

CHAPTER I

THE little house was on the edge of the woods; that fact was beyond dispute. The gloom of the pine-lands came out palpably and enveloped it at twilight, and the morning sun shone upon it through overhanging boughs. These things, of themselves, would have decided Celia Northrup upon the purchase, but, in addition, the marsh stretched its green-brown expanse just in front of the door.

The month was December. Celia stood on her piazza and looked upon the Pleiads in the steely blue sky above the moss-hung oaks. It was hers, all hers—the oaks, the Pleiads, the night sky, the solitude, the marshes, the wide reach of river beyond—hers through possession of the vantage-point on which she stood, the little house, with its squares of yellow light behind her. How strange to think that “men in nations” were fighting, anywhere in such a world.

There was a fascination in the night, filled as it was with the mystic sound of the wind—the wind that might be the labored breathing of the great land around her arming for war. She pulled her shawl about her, for the air bit shrewdly, as the old stories have it. She could not bear to go in, but sat in a huddled heap upon the steps.

This was the scene of her childhood, endeared by a thousand memories, and, by a happy chance, she had been able to return to it. Across the marsh, half a mile further down the river, she had been born—some thirty-odd years before. She could feel the bond that held her to the place; she had felt it always. It had been strong enough, indeed, to bring her back. That night, in the freshness of her return, standing alone beneath the familiar stars, with the salt smell in the wind, and about her the deep sense of solitude that she knew so well, it seemed a very real force. She felt herself a part of the earth and air, the pines, and the silence. Love for them all was bred in her bones, certainly. Yet she had wandered far since those early days, and her life had run in the grooves of sophistication, even of worldliness, of the better sort. She was feeling much, but thinking little as she stood there.

Suddenly there was a new sound quite near—the rustle of leaves stirred not by wind but by purpose.

“Kitty!” said Celia.

The big cat purred for answer and rubbed in friendliness against her. They were neighbors, nothing more. He lived in the overgrown field just beyond and made a very substantial support in the way of mice and lizards, with an occasional bird, to boot, or even a fiddler or two from the marshes to give variety to his diet. His coat was thick and rough, a good covering against the weather. He would never come into Celia’s house, but he often called her to come out, for they found each other

companionable. Upon this occasion he ran down the steps and looked back at her suggestively.

"Well, I'll go to the gate," she said, and so they strolled down the walk, both of them leisurely and reflective.

Turning at the gate, quite clear of the trees, Celia could see the splendid sweep of the heavens, where Orion held his shield on high. The cat, too, looked upward.

"Many a night from yonder ivied casement, ere I went to rest,
Did I look on great Orion sloping slowly to the West."

The cat made a little sound of approval. Perhaps it was only response to Celia's voice as she quoted, yet the jewelled night sky must have been to him very familiar.

"I think I shall call you Orion," she said, stooping to rub his head. "At any rate, you are as much a soldier of fortune as he."

The cat seemed unconcerned; a name was, after all, of little consequence. He stopped at the foot of the steps as they went back.

"You won't come in?" Celia asked.

Orion, so newly yclept, purred loudly, but declined. He could not see why Celia should prefer the fireside to her front yard upon a night so fine.

But Celia's fireplace measured five feet across. She threw a lightwood knot beneath the smouldering logs. Those lines from "Locksley Hall" had set her thinking—a little sadly, perhaps, or perhaps

it may have been sceptically. Was romantic love so essential to the happiness of life? She had trifled with the passion considerably in years gone by, and she had enjoyed the trifling, but certain interests and comforts and æstheticisms had made for her a very pleasant and a very satisfying life, not at all lonely, in spite now of the marshes and the pines.

Mrs. Lovell, her housekeeper-companion, snored loudly in the little room on the other side of the chimney, and the "good logs of Algidus roared louder yet within."

Mrs. Lovell was not much of a housekeeper, but Celia considered her, as a companion, invaluable. She crocheted lace, counting stitches all day long, and she went to sleep early at night. Besides these things, she was amiable, and a lady. Surely one would have been unreasonable to expect further virtue.

It was only half past nine, though—too early to go to bed. Celia's book was not very interesting. She picked it up, but closed it again, and fell to watching the fire—her favorite pastime on a winter night.

The footstep that sounded on the porch startled her, and she went with some trepidation to the door.

"Is it too late for a call?" asked a voice from without, a rich English voice.

Celia liked the English. Above all things she liked their intonations, and the youth upon her doorstep spoke with all the evidences of his nationality. She had met him but the day before, almost, indeed, upon the moment of his arrival, and she had

liked him at once; in spite of his youth he was interesting. He, too, was a neighbor, a temporary neighbor, cast up by the war in that quiet port, on furlough now, broken in health and in nerves. Decidedly bored, yet decidedly amusing, he seemed to carry an atmosphere of London about with him—of smart London. Perhaps it was what some of the cults call an aura, but, at any rate, it was effective and stimulating to the fancy against a background of winter woods.

"You're not as strict as my landlady, Mrs. Penton," Lieutenant Wrexham said as he entered. "She's in bed by nine every night."

"I'm something of an owl," said Celia, "and I think it's never too late nor too early for anything in the country."

"That's one reason I hate the country," he observed. "There's no form to the bally thing. It's all over the place, as you Americans say. Oh, no, give me London; I'll stick to my own village."

Celia smiled; she found great entertainment in his odd expressions. She happened to be his first acquaintance in the neighborhood, outside of the Pentons' establishment, where he boarded, and she viewed him with indulgence. He was young in years, but London had given him maturity of manner and cynicism of thought.

"There are a few forms here," she said. "For instance, I never serve tea at this hour of the night."

"Many thanks, I don't care for tea," he declared.

"What, an Englishman!"

"Not in America," he explained.

"You think we don't know how to make it?"

"I shouldn't say that. But what I've got I haven't liked."

"Yet America is not a bad place to be just now," Celia reminded him.

"America's right enough, now that she's come into the war," he answered with a smile—a flashing smile that broke the formal convention of his face.

Lieutenant Wrexham, of the Irish Guards, may have been, at a stretch, twenty-five, and he had been in the battle of the Marne. That last fact, in itself, was enough to cast a sort of glamour about him—in the rear-guard on the retreat from Mons.

"I had to get up the wagons at night, when the airmen gave us the location of the command. Sometimes I didn't get there till morning, and the men were on the march again, but I couldn't help it," he announced in a matter-of-fact fashion.

The statement invoked a pitying thought of the men who marched all day and depended upon Lieutenant Wrexham to bring up the wagons at night. And yet, he had been there! He had endured the horrors of those first terrifying weeks with the expeditionary army in Flanders; he had been in that awful retreat along the poplared roads of France. It was hard to believe. He was so slight, so graceful, with that charming mixture of audacity and elegance that little marks the soldier.

To Miss Northrup he suggested the house of

Stuart—nothing less. Possibly that may have been because, despite her years, there was a strain of romance still dominant in her nature. Wrexham's blood was good, however, if not royal. He was, indeed, the grandson of a peer—a young sprig of British aristocracy, as the phrase goes.

"I'll tell you who I am," he said, and mentioned a prime minister of the earlier Hanovers. "Oh, I grant you he wasn't much, the old chap, but still not every one is a prime minister."

He made the explanation with great indifference of manner, though with deep-seated pride. Celia smiled at him in a way that he found rather irritating.

"What is it now?" he asked quickly. "I've a sense of humor myself, but, my word, I can't see what you Americans are always laughing at."

"I wasn't laughing at anything; it merely puts me in a good humor to be talking to the grandson of a prime minister," she told him.

"Oh, I say, it's not as near as that," he explained carefully. "It's really a long way back, and besides, all the brains have gone out of the family now."

"That's too bad," said Celia, thinking how well he looked in the wicker chair by the blazing logs. He accommodated himself with grace to interiors; she fancied that her living-room had gained a certain elegance from his presence.

"I don't know that it makes any great amount of difference," said the lieutenant. "Of course, at

times, it's a trifle annoying to have no brains and no education; still, as I said before, I've a sense of humor."

"But I thought you went to a public school," Celia objected.

"I did; I went to Harrow, and I'm rather soft on the old place, but I didn't know anything when I went there, and I think I knew rather less when I left. You see, I went it a bit strong on athletics."

"What was your line?"

"Cricket. That's the only thing that counts in England, at least at a public school. But I never saw anything like the ignorance about it here. Those Penton boys, where I'm staying, for instance—darned noisy little brutes—don't know a thing in the world about it. I spoke of the nets, you know, and they thought it was a sort of fishing expedition I was telling about."

"They play baseball," said Celia.

"Very probably. I don't care for it."

"Do you know the game?"

"No, I don't know it—we didn't play it in England. Oh, I talk about a home run, sometimes, and Casey at the bat, but I don't know the game. I played cricket at Harrow, and that's about all I did. Occasionally, they'd cram me up for an examination, and push me along. But, after all, what does it matter? Nobody cares about mathematics. What's the use of proving $15x^2$ equal to a^3b ? Believe me, I can call a cab and get to the Savoy without that."

"Your present hotel must be rather a change from the Savoy," said Celia.

"Oh, it wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for the children," he answered. "It must be excessively expensive to have so many children."

"Why, there are only three little Pentons," said Celia.

"I think you must be mistaken," the lieutenant replied. "I've never counted them, to be sure, but they make a remarkable amount of noise."

"Don't you see them at the table?"

"Yes, of course, but they seem to come and go. I rather thought they were fed up in relays. The little beasts are always eating, you know; they're always coming out of the back passage with pieces of bread and jam. I'm sure I don't get any of it, and I'm paying rather a good price, too."

He spoke with some resentment, and Celia concealed her smile. "Do you like jam?" she asked.

"Yes; a darned sight better than the things Mrs. Penton is always shoving at me."

"She's a very nice woman," said Celia.

"Oh, very nice. I've got no sort of grudge against her except the pink potatoes she expects me to eat."

"Pink?" Celia questioned.

"Yes; sweet potatoes, quite pink."

"How did you happen to go to the Pentons'?"

"My physician in London sent me out for the climate," he answered, "and the British consul in the city here looked up the lodging for me. It's rather too domestic, but still a man has to adapt

himself to things of the sort. I'm not accustomed to a very regular life. When I was a child, you see, my father was like myself—restless. He had always to be doing something—always keeping up the pace. If the racing-season should happen to close a week or so before the shooting began, he'd say, 'Come on, Dicky, we'll go to Constantinople, or perhaps to Vienna'—anywhere to be on the trot. And then my mother doesn't care very much for England. She prefers to live in Paris. So I've never had what one might call a home. I've lived in hotels, but that, I suppose, is scarcely the same thing."

"No, not quite the same," Celia agreed, and she was aware of a sense of pity for the lieutenant almost maternal in its quality.

He knew he had missed something in life, some experience that was accounted of value, but he was disposed to be doubtful as to its desirability. "I fancy I should not have liked family life," he said. "One can get fed up with that sort of thing."

"The Pentons don't get tired of it," said Celia.

"Well, of course, some people seem to prefer it. Now, my uncle's family is domestic, very much so, and, my word, they've got no use for me—nor I for them. As a matter of fact, they're uncommonly tiresome. You see, they hold me responsible for my cousin's marrying an actress."

"Were you responsible?"

"Well, I should say not. I introduced him, but I couldn't tell that the fool was going off his head.

Maisie Le Blanc was being backed for a little part in a musical comedy, when he came to town one night, and we rolled in to see her. Maisie's got a voice like a nail on glass, and she's only fit for the third line in the chorus, but he hadn't seen anything but poachers and pheasants for the past six months, and he went crazy about her. The idea of blaming me for the thing! Why, I wouldn't have married Maisie if she'd been the last woman in London, and I told him so. He's one of the best fellows in the regiment, but there's Maisie still hanging on, and it's a darned pity. He was mentioned twice in Sir Douglas Haig's despatches. Our command was in that division, you know, in the beginning."

"You admire Sir Douglas Haig?"

"Well, he saved France," said the lieutenant, with an air of such deep conviction as to admit of no dispute. "If we hadn't turned his right, Von Kluck would have been in Paris." He stroked his mustache, pride in his regiment and his commander very evidently filling his thoughts.

"The French are very fine soldiers," Celia said reflectively.

"Undoubtedly. And so are the British," he answered at once.

"Don't leave out the Americans," she begged.

"We can't afford to. My word, we were glad to get you in!" he exclaimed.

"It's nice to have you say something really pleasant about America," Celia commented.

He looked up in surprise. "I like a great many things about America."

"What, for instance?"

"Well, I like all your expressions, the frozen mit, and the glad hand, and the rest. I use them all. I know a fellow who gets them out on the stage in London, and he tells them to me when they're quite new; so I have them all—very American, you know, and very cute. And then, I like your prison system."

"You are rather broad in your interests," Celia commented.

"Well, a fellow has to have a serious side to him if he's got any political aim in view."

"You mean you'll try for Parliament?"

"Eventually, I dare say."

"Which party?"

"Oh, I'm a Tory—all my people are, have been always. But I shall not be a Tory if I stand for Parliament. I should not get in if I were; I shall be a Radical."

"I believe you could make a good speech," Celia said, amused by his unblushing announcement.

"I fancy I might. My people could always talk pretty well—that's about all they could do. My father, now, had always an answer ready that made the other fellow seem like a fool. He got the people to laughing, you know. Of course he was a bit unscrupulous at times, but he was a good speaker—my father."

Celia found this frankness in no way disconcert-

ing. She was growing accustomed to the lieutenant's matter-of-fact statements. He presented England most agreeably to her fancy—the England of fiction, before-the-war England. He might have stepped from the pages of a novel. She even thought of Thackeray, despite the Marne and the Aisne.

“Shall I have a cigarette?” he suggested suddenly.

She shook her head.

“No? You don't like them?”

“I don't like men to smoke when they come to see me.”

“My word, what would you do if you had a husband?”

“I shan't have one.”

“That's not the point. You wouldn't keep one if you held on to those ideas. You should see my mother. She smokes fifty cigarettes a day, or rather, she used to; she's not so bad now.”

Celia wanted to hear about his mother, but the snores of Mrs. Lovell grew insistent and could scarcely be ignored.

“German guns,” said the lieutenant, smiling. “One gets rather used to that sort of booming in France.”

He rose as he spoke, and as Celia looked at him, so vivid, so gilded, it seemed to her well that he should be in America. What would it advantage the British Empire if one of those same German guns should cut him off in the morning of his youth, even though it might be in the heyday of his follies?

Somehow, the assurance of follies, past, present, or to come, was given by Lieutenant Wrexham's personality.

He rolled his cigarette with care, then he said good night, and went out into the cold, pine-scented air.

Orion, moving upward and onward, had looked upon young Englishmen before, but Orion, the cat, observed him with caution and interest from beneath a palmetto bush, to which he had retreated in momentary cessation of the night's sport.

CHAPTER II

ROBERT PENTON ran Celia's engine—a mechanism which, in some unknown way, was connected with a pump. Celia herself did not understand it; she had acquired the system of waterworks with the house. Robert was nine, and, having passed each one of his years in inquiry, his knowledge was comprehensive. He called upon Celia before she had been in her new house a half-hour, and he showed her how to do a great many things. His hard little fists pulled back bolts, twisted screws, and opened locks with an ease which commanded respect. He advised her as to the methods of the former owner upon numberless points of procedure, and, last of all, mounting the wood-box in the kitchen, he secured the key of the engine-room. Then he conducted her across the yard and exhibited the engine. She tried very hard to do as he directed, but the stop-cocks and levers were confusing, and, when she finally mastered them and looked to see the wheels start, Robert said: "Now crank her!"

The command was Celia's undoing. She couldn't crank her, try as she might.

"You got to put all your stren'th in it," said Robert.

"I am," gasped Celia.

He watched her efforts critically; there was no sympathy in his gaze—she realized that. The

wheels went around once or twice ineffectually, then stopped. Again and again she tried, but with no better result.

"Something must be the matter with it, Robert," she said helplessly.

Robert took the crank from her hand. His air was superior, and she gave way before it.

"'Tain't nothin' the matter with it," he said. It was marvellous to see the effectiveness of his effort. "You got to put all you got behind her," he explained.

Celia looked at him with respect. Then they went outside again, and she offered him the position of engineer. It was a business proposition, and Robert accepted it, with evident satisfaction.

He was very proud of his new responsibility, and he came over every day either to "crank her" or to "look at her," for he and Celia got on remarkably well together.

The morning after Lieutenant Wrexham's visit she was at breakfast when Robert arrived for the key. "You're late," he said.

"I overslept myself," she confessed.

"Me and Jimmy don't get anything when we do that," Robert remarked, and he cast an interested eye at the waffles with which Celia was occupied.

"Come and have some with me," she urged. Robert hesitated, but did not decline. "Go and wash your hands," she suggested.

He knew where that could be done, and hurried off. The waffles seemed a matter of course after that.

He slipped quite casually into the chair that Mrs. Lovell had vacated.

"I know why you overslep' yourself; you was up late seein' comp'ny," said Robert, after the waffles had been disposed of.

"Mr. Wrexham came to see me," Celia replied.

"I know he did. Papa made Jimmy sit up to let him in," said Robert. He kept up with the comings and goings of the newly acquired British boarder. "Jimmy don't like him," he volunteered.

"Why not?"

"He says he's a dood."

"Jimmy ought not to mind that; he's a soldier."

"Jimmy says he looks more like a dood than a soldier 'cause he wears a bokay in his buttonhole, and he slicks his hair with oil."

"That's it!" thought Celia with a smile. Lieutenant Wrexham's fine dark hair had certainly a wonderful lustre. She had noticed, too, the faintest suggestion of bergamot that hung about him. Whatever the application that he affected, she was sure it was in use in London high life, however singular it might seem to Jimmy. He was a young man of fashion—to Celia's fancy much like those who lounged in the windows of White's in the days of Rawdon Crawley, or, indeed, seen from another view-point, like those who stood with the Iron Duke at Waterloo. Lieutenant Wrexham, too, had seen service upon the Continent, very active service that—from the Marne to the Aisne. There was something about him, surely, that stirred the imagina-

tion, and she thrilled with the excitement of the scenes that his presence made so real. Yet his lordly calm and indifference were so amusing in contrast. His manner was so evidently the resultant of forces that had made for elegance of convention through many years of "just and old renown." In addition, the line of his brow was peculiarly pleasing. "If I were ten years younger—" thought Celia.

Robert found her not as diverting as usual. He said he was going back in the woods to see a man Jimmy had found there—a man who had a tin house.

Celia awoke to her conversational responsibilities. "What's he doing in it?"

Jimmy didn't know, that was one reason Robert was going to see the man and his house. There was not much that happened or existed in the region that lay within the possibilities of Robert's muscular little legs of which he did not early become aware.

Celia went down to the gate with him to start him upon his way, and he counted every narcissus bulb that had sent its stiff, pointed leaves above the earth—just dots of green breaking the surface here and there in the beds along the walk. At one place there were footprints in the soft earth—small footprints. Celia looked accusingly at Robert.

He was outraged at her suspicions. "'Tain't me," he said in an offended tone.

"I didn't think you'd walk on the garden-beds," she replied.

"No'm, I wouldn't," said Robert, "not when the bulbs are comin' up. Besides, it's bigger'n my shoes." He was measuring his foot very carefully in the tracks as he spoke, and he showed the discrepancy with satisfaction. "Must 'a' been Jimmy," he announced.

"It wasn't Mr. Wrexham," said Celia.

"He would just as lief step on 'em, though; he wouldn't know no difference." Robert had the agriculturalist's scorn of the townsman.

She smiled at the natural antagonism as she sat on the cross-ties of the railroad-track and watched her engineer run, in his little-boy fashion, down the grass-grown way until he cut into the woods and disappeared. Celia rather wished she had gone with him, for she felt some curiosity about the man in the tin house herself.

It was too pretty a day to go inside, for, December though it was, the sky was blue and the salt air very mild. Such winter days come often on the Georgia coast. The sweet-gum leaves were still red, the hickories still yellow. The live-oaks spread their branches above, their pendants of moss slightly swaying in the breeze, and the marshes, not of "Glynn," but of Chatham, stretched out in soft monotonies of color. Beyond ran the river, a sparkling stream of life, ever new, ever varied, bringing to its embayed fastnesses all the deep mystery of the sea.

Celia forgot about Robert and the man in the tin house, forgot even Mr. Richard Wrexham and the

vivid impression of another civilization that he had given. She lost herself in the beauty of the still world and let her thoughts wander. After all, though, once again, she was not thinking, she was merely feeling. It was just a sort of vibrant, half-conscious response to sun and air and color.

Before long Orion, the cat, came out of the marsh, along the edge where the ground is hard and unwary fiddlers may be secured without danger from mud and water. Seeing Celia, he purred a greeting and bounded up the path. He was busy, but he could never resist the chance for agreeable companionship. So he sat down at her side and every now and then, when she forgot to stroke him, he purred louder still and rubbed against her, putting his head down with an odd, sideways motion, while his tail brushed her face. He had a very friendly nature, this self-sustaining cat. At last, though, certain faint chirps or squeaks reached his finely attuned sportsman's ear, and he went off again, this time into the thicket on the other side of the track.

Turning to watch Orion, Celia saw that Molly Hunter was coming down the road, and she rose and walked to meet her.

"I have to go to the store," said Molly; "sugar's out."

She was a well-built girl with a mobile, irregular face. Celia was, perhaps, the first to observe that the face had charm. She joined the girl and they walked along together for a little way.

"I've discovered why I like you," Celia said contemplatively; "you don't wear sport clothes."

Molly gasped. "Oh, don't you like them?" she asked.

"I'm tired of them; there's such a sameness in their variety."

"I wish I had some of them," said Molly with a sigh. "I wear what I've got, or what I can make, and somehow my things look just like clothes, and that's all."

"No, that's not all; they suit you, and they suit the landscape, so that the effect is very satisfactory."

"But sport clothes suit the out-of-doors," Molly argued.

"They suit country clubs," said Celia, "and summer-colony life, but they always seem to me to belittle the real business of country living. Only the city people wear them."

"But I don't like to fade into the landscape," Molly objected.

"I don't believe you could ever fade into anything," said Celia, with an appreciative glance at the girl's fresh color, and the pretty light on her hair. "You see, it's more artistic to be a part of the scene, and not an excrescence upon it—like Marie Antoinette, for instance, playing milkmaid with her ladies in waiting."

"Or like Lieutenant Wrexham, lately arrived from London," said Molly, smiling.

"Have you met him?" Celia asked.

"No. Robert has told me about him, and I've seen him through the fence."

"He's very fetching," said Celia.

"I haven't anything stylish enough to put on to meet him in, so I won't be able to know about that; but he's beautiful to look upon. It made me feel that I was in high life just to see him lounge across the Pentons' front yard."

"You'll like him. He's not just a tailor's dummy; he's really clever," Celia said reflectively. "If I were your age I should find his propinquity very exciting, only—" She stopped, with an odd look at the girl's responsive face.

"Only what?" asked Molly, aware of a sudden seriousness in Celia's voice and manner.

"I scarcely know how to say it—he's the sort of man that polite villains are made of, I'm afraid."

"You'll make him irresistible if you are going to warn me against him," said Molly.

"I dare say," Celia answered, and yet she realized that Molly, in spite of the simplicity that had surrounded her life, perhaps because of it, was possessed of a certain dignity and poise which even as charming a young man as Mr. Richard Wrexham would do well to recognize.

They parted at the turn of the road. Molly went on to the store; Celia went back to her house, for a few domestic duties overhung her consciousness.

Mrs. Lovell was sitting in the sun on the front piazza, crocheting as usual.

"How much have you finished?" Celia asked.

The older lady did two stitches more before she answered. Having completed the scallop, she stopped counting, took up the lace and measured back to the pin that marked the limit of yesterday's achievement.

"All of that to-day?"

"That's not much," said Mrs. Lovell. "I used to go twice as fast before this finger got so stiff. Was that Molly Hunter you were talking to?"

"Yes. She's a nice girl."

"Very nice," said Mrs. Lovell shortly.

Celia resented the faint praise. "A girl can be attractive without being related to all the old families!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Lovell agreed. She counted fifteen more stitches, and then said: "Her grandfather, you know——"

"Yes, I know," said Celia, "but I don't care what he was."

Mrs. Lovell sighed. "No, I don't suppose it makes any difference now," she said. "Besides, old Hunter was a very worthy man—too bad there weren't more like him. His son has been a ne'er-do-well, though, all his life."

"A good-looking man," said Celia.

"Yes. His looks were the undoing of Molly Lancaster. It was a bad day's work for her when she married him."

"He has made her a good husband."

"He's not what I call a good husband!" Mrs.

Lovell exclaimed. "He hasn't made a decent support, and he was not in her circle of society."

"Well, she looks happy, nevertheless," said Celia, "and her children are well-bred—Molly, in particular, managed to make a discreet selection of looks and virtues."

"No doubt," said Mrs. Lovell, and rounded out another scallop in the lace pattern.

"Isn't it a perfect day," said Celia, leaning against a column and looking up into the oak boughs.

"Very pretty," said Mrs. Lovell, not looking up, and still absorbed with her lace.

The negro servant-girl came to the door just then. "Ma's in the kitchen, Miss Celia," she said.

Celia turned quickly. She had a good many visits from the negroes around. "Why, I thought your mother was sick, Lizzie," she said.

"Pa drive 'em over in the wagin," the girl answered.

Melinda, Lizzie's mother, was indeed seated by the stove in the kitchen.

"Why, Linda," Celia exclaimed, "I'm so glad you're up again!"

"Oh, my Lord! Don't say a word!" Melinda replied, shaking warmly the hand that Celia offered.

"Ma sho' been sick," said Lizzie, as she polished the water-kettle.

Celia drew up a chair on the other side of the stove, and Melinda reached for the bucket on the floor by her side.

"I fetch a few oshta for you," she said in a shame-faced way.

"Oysters! How nice! You remembered how I loved oysters, didn't you?" Celia exclaimed.

"Oh, my Farder! Yes'm," said Melinda. "Lizzie, when missie jis kin walk she usen to beg Zeke to open oshta for 'em."

"Well, I declare," said Lizzie, who, yet, had heard the story before.

Celia could vaguely remember those days, sitting close to Zeke, and eating oysters from a very muddy knife. She looked at Melinda with a pleasant thought of the kindly relations that ran so far into the past.

Melinda's appearance might have been considered effective; it could scarcely be called artistic. Her head was wound in a piece of checked gingham, and on top of the wrappings she wore a dilapidated straw hat. Her blue apron was tied outside of a greenish-brown cloak, and her black skirt, rolled at the waist to make it swing clear, revealed a pair of old tan shoes of masculine cut.

"Here's two aig I fetch for you," she said, and handed out a small crumpled paper bag, bulging at the bottom, and twisted at the top.

"Eggs, too!" cried Celia.

"De fowl jis sta't to lay. I been comin' las' week, but I couldn't git nothin' to bring you. I tell you, ma'am, dese here doctor—he have me strip, he have me clean out."

Melinda referred to finances.

"You had no business bringing me things to-day," Celia said severely.

"Oh, my Master! Dat is my pleasure, ma'am. An', as for de doctors—if a person kinnot pay, well now, what is to do? Besides, it ain't nare one of 'em done me no good."

"What did help you, Melinda?"

"He is a 'oman doctor, a colored 'oman. He git right to de trouble, time he come in de ya'd."

Lizzie laughed a little uneasily. "Ma is ole-time people, Miss Celia," she said.

"Old-time people know what they're talking about," Celia replied.

"You right," said Linda.

"I guess that doctor saw your wash-tubs; that's the trouble with you," Celia declared.

"Das it, now," cried Linda, leaning forward and speaking in a mysterious whisper. "Right by dem tubs. She tell me somethin' is plant by 'em."

"Oh, some sort of poisonous weed," said Celia, struggling for Melinda's meaning.

Lizzie giggled, and Linda looked a little embarrassed. Evidently there had not been a poisonous weed by the wash-tubs.

"W'ite people ain' know nothin' 'bout dese here thing," said Linda. "You see, she say I got some kind 'er enemy what plant 'em dey for spite."

"Oh, you mean a charm—a hoodoo. Yes, of course," cried Celia.

"Das it!" Linda exclaimed with satisfaction at having made herself clear at last.

"I've heard of such things," said Celia.

"Some people don' b'lieve in 'em," Linda continued, "but I tell you, ma'am, fo' de Lord, time Lizzie dig up dat thing, I begin to git back my stren'th."

Lizzie had stopped her work and had come over to join the conversation more intimately. No longer did she see fit to laugh at her mother's story. "It was two chicken feather, an' a piece er red string, an' a shoe-lacin'," she said, with some awe in her voice. "I taken 'em on a stick, an' I throw 'em in de creek," she ended.

"But who could have wanted to put a hoodoo on you, Linda?" Celia asked.

Again Linda became embarrassed. "It's some kine er low-down 'oman," she answered.

"Somebody who wants to get you out of the way and marry Moses," Celia suggested.

"Jis so," Matilda agreed.

"Well, if you don't stop tying up your head and going about like an old woman, she'll get him any-way," said Celia as she rose.

"My Gawd, ain't it so!" Melinda exclaimed. Lizzie, returning to her labors, added her assenting comment: "Mens sho is mighty easy fooled."

"Fill your mother's bucket with sugar, Lizzie," Celia directed, and she herself wrapped up a package of tea.

"My Lord an' King!" said Melinda in polite surprise at the courtesy, which, however, was proscribed by convention in those parts. Then, with

her hand upon the kitchen-door, poised for departure, she arrived at one of the primary objects of her visit. "You ain' got no w'ite skirt you could gim me, missie, eh?"

"You couldn't wear my skirts, Linda," Celia replied.

"No, ma'am. 'Tis for Stena, she goin' to baptize on Sunday."

"Christina? I'm glad to hear it."

"Don' say a word!" Linda exclaimed. "She been werry headstrong, an' I glad to git 'em in de chu'ch."

"Yes, it's a good thing," said Celia, "and I'll look for a skirt and send it by Lizzie when she goes home to-night."

"Praise de Lord, my w'ite people done come back to live by me!" cried Linda. Celia, too, felt that an old tie had been very happily renewed.

CHAPTER III

THE habit of dropping in upon Miss Northrup for afternoon tea was one which Lieutenant Wrexham very easily acquired. In the first place, he liked her; in the second place, despite his statement to the contrary, he liked tea—even American tea—and nobody else served it at that time of day, a fact which caused him to declare the region benighted.

"You have some of the most remarkable American habits over here," he declared.

"It would be remarkable if we didn't have them," Celia reminded him.

"Possibly," he admitted. "But consider this business of talking at breakfast. Now, the Pentons, where I'm boarding, are forever talking to me at breakfast. I've told them about it, but they will keep on at it, so now I don't get up at all. I have them put something by for me, and I eat it when they are all out of the way."

"You must be a very troublesome boarder," said Celia.

"Oh, I dare say; but one doesn't expect a boarder to be anything else."

"It would do you good to have to keep them."

"No doubt. There must be a great many things that would do me good, but fortunately I have not had to encounter them yet."

"Have you ever had to work?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I worked quite a bit in France—or rather, I got excessively fatigued, though I don't know that I accomplished very much. And then, you know, being in the Guards in peace-time is not all sport. I tell you it's no fun being on duty at the palace. Three times we have to go the rounds of the sentries, and the last time is anywhere between twelve and two in the morning. But, if one has been drinking a lot of champagne, of course, one doesn't go all the way around. Oh, I fancy the duties of a guardsman are many more than you suppose."

"And in peace are you always in London?"

"Oh, yes. In attendance upon the King. But they keep a good many of us away on leave, because it's better not to have us hanging around in London when we're not on duty."

"I should think it would be a dreadful life!" Celia exclaimed impulsively.

"No, it's not a dreadful life at all; it's exceedingly pleasant, only—" The lieutenant's face grew serious for a moment, even a little melancholy, Celia fancied.

"Only what?" she asked.

"Well, I've just enough sense to see that I'll never come to anything there, for if one is in the Guards, you know, one is rather apt to go the pace."

"Why don't you resign from the Guards?"

"Resign from the Guards when England is at war? Impossible."

"Oh, I had forgotten," Celia said, and marvelled that the consideration of the lieutenant and his affairs should have thrown the world's catastrophe into the background for the moment. "I was only thinking that perhaps a more regular occupation——"

He interrupted her. "I see. You are working toward that old idea that I should do something useful—get up at six o'clock and plant turnips."

"Well, if Diocletian could raise cabbages," she replied.

"Never met the person," the lieutenant exclaimed.

"He came a little before your day."

"No doubt. I may have heard him referred to at Harrow. As a matter of fact," he went on, "I suppose it would be rather difficult for me to make my own living. I should sooner be dead than stay in one of those pens in a bank. I dare say I might keep myself going on the stage."

"As a leading man?" she suggested.

"My aunt, no! I couldn't sustain the part. The most I could do would be the juvenile lead. I do that very well. You see, I'm just a bit of an ass anyway, and I walk about in my own character, and that's all there is to it. I might do that, or I might get a job as a chauffeur; I can drive a car like mad, and I can take one apart and put it together again. No, that's a lie—I can take it apart, but I can't quite get it together again. At any rate, I could run it until the darned thing smashed, and then I could get another job. Besides that, I can drive an aeroplane."

Miss Northrup exclaimed in astonishment: "How did you learn?"

"Oh, perhaps I'm puffing myself a bit. I've never been up alone, and, of course, that's the whole thing—to estimate the pressure, and all that; but I've driven one very often. My friend Larsen used to take me up. You've heard of Larsen, probably. Wonderful driver! He was killed, you know, last month; or rather, he dropped into the North Sea. I can't understand how he came a cropper."

"Was he shot?"

"No, the blooming thing must have broken; it could never have been Larsen's fault."

This reminiscence of his friend visibly depressed the lieutenant, and he turned from it with a sigh. Celia shared his depression; such casual references brought the war so near. She changed the subject forcibly. "I asked Molly Hunter to come up this afternoon."

He looked up quickly, not with very great pleasure, Celia thought.

"I want you to meet a really nice American girl," she said.

"Many thanks, I'm sure," he replied, with his most formal air of reserve.

"You don't look as appreciative of the favor as you should," Celia complained.

"Oh, I say, you misunderstand me," he answered. "The fact of the matter is I can't think of anything to say to young girls. I'm not much on conventional society—I like the Bohemian set."

"Because you're not of it," Celia said wisely.

"Very probably you're right there, but I don't care to be chaperoned so violently. The theatrical people are much better fun—they're racy, you know."

"Certainly you won't find Molly Hunter that, but she's not difficult either," Celia guaranteed.

The lieutenant shook his head. "I fear I should not think of anything to say to her."

"She might think of a thing or two."

"Possibly; yet I shouldn't care to risk it," he announced.

"If you had seen Molly you wouldn't decline the situation in this rude way," Celia told him.

"That's just it; I have seen her. Very charming-looking girl. I saw her through the hedge. She was spying at me, you know, but I didn't let on that I saw her. Very attractive-looking, very charming."

"And you really don't want to meet her?" Celia looked puzzled.

There was a peculiar expression on Wrexham's face; she saw it and wondered.

"It's a bit hard to explain to you," he said, "but one becomes interested, you know—that sort of thing."

"Well, why not?"

"Yes, of course, that's probably the way it appears to you, but, you see, I know myself, and, after all, I rather like a woman who's been through the mill."

"You're probably not a fit person for Molly to meet," Celia said sharply.

"Quite so," he agreed.

"She has too much good feeling and good sense to be the sort of girl you admire," Celia remarked, and the lieutenant did not dispute the point.

"Oh, I dare say she has a darned sight more brains than I've got," he said, and stroked his mustache, that small, jaunty affair that gave him an air so modishly modern. "By the way," he announced abruptly, "I got a cable from Edie Ingot to-day." It was evident that the fact gave him great satisfaction.

"Edie Ingot?" Celia went back into her remembrance. "I believe you've spoken of her before," she said rather coldly.

He ignored her tone and went on with enthusiasm: "I should think I had. I must tell Edie that. Spoken of her before! She's a bright, particular star of the London stage."

"I'm afraid I don't remember all the theatrical people you talk about."

"Yes, but Edie's rather different."

It was difficult to be severe with him. "What did she cable about?" Celia asked, unbending.

"She's got a new play on—a great success at the Duke of York's Theatre. Oh, you should see the way the people stand about the stage door to see her when she's playing in London. And on tour it's quite the same. I went with her into north England when she was playing 'A Bunch of Daises,' and in Manchester they got on top of her car in the street. I said to her: 'You're getting notorious, Edie.' I used the wrong word, you know, and she

said: 'My aunt, don't call me that. But that's what I shall be, Dicky, if I go around with you much longer.' I've a racy sort of reputation, you know. Not that Edie cares—she's a clean little sport. Oh, I'm very fond of Edie. I've given up a lot of invitations for her, too—country houses and all that."

"Why should you give them up?"

"Because, if I didn't, she'd chuck me when I came back, that's why. I've known Edie for some time," he went on, "before she married Seymour, in fact."

This put the matter in a new aspect. "She's married?" asked Celia.

"She was; Seymour was killed in France at the very beginning of the war—or rather, he died in a field-hospital."

The war! Here again was that strange and awful experience, which seemed to Celia to give dignity to the lieutenant's not very purposeful life.

"I was with the old fellow when he died," he continued. "He was my best friend in the regiment; every one thought us very much alike."

Suddenly Celia's eyes blurred. She seemed to see the two young men together, so worldly and debonair, so unfit for the business of dying.

"He left me his man. He said: 'Dicky, I've nothing to leave you but Hawkins. He's a drunken brute, but he knows how to press trousers.' And he certainly does. I was glad to get him, too, for my own fellow had been killed."

Celia looked up with a smile at his absurdities,

and she saw Molly Hunter coming up the garden-path. The lieutenant noticed that the attention of his hostess was centred on the window. "Is she coming?" he asked quickly.

"You can get out by the side-piazza," Celia said curtly.

"Many thanks. I think, after all, I'd rather stay."

There was no time to argue the point; Molly knocked at the front door, then "lifted the latch, and walked in."

"Am I too late for tea?" she asked from the doorway.

She looked very pretty that afternoon; Celia felt distinct satisfaction at her appearance. Charms were never unperceived by Lieutenant Wrexham. In spite of the blank conventionality of his expression, Celia felt sure that he appraised them in this instance. His bow might have been executed in Soho. Molly looked at him with interest.

"I never saw a real live Englishman before," she said as he handed her the cup that Celia had filled.

His smile flashed in quick response. "My word, but it must be a peculiar experience," he said.

"It's very interesting," said Molly.

At that the lieutenant bowed again, and somehow Celia got the impression that he, too, had encountered a new and not an unpleasing type.

CHAPTER IV

SUBSEQUENT to that afternoon at Celia's, the lieutenant spent a good deal of time looking over the hedge to see if Molly Hunter was out in her garden. But Molly was a young woman of many duties; she was not in the habit of walking about aimlessly in the working-hours of the day. Besides her sewing and household responsibilities, both most absorbing, she put in a couple of hours at the piano every day.

"Why don't you let up on it?" the lieutenant asked in annoyance. It irritated him that she should find so little time for his society. "My word, it's not worth it. If you were going to be a great musician and make a lot of money, I shouldn't wish to interfere, but this business of grinding away for no sort of use is beyond my understanding. Very worthy, I'm sure, but life is not long enough for that kind of virtue."

"People differ in their views of those things," said Molly, who was rather proud of her music. "Personally, I have some faint desire to amount to something."

"I shall overlook the slight you cast upon my own ambition," he answered magnanimously, "but as for you and this bally old music—Beethoven, you know, and all that bunch—you'll never do anything

with it. Believe me, I know. I don't give a hang for the old sinners myself, but I've heard a lot of that sort of thing, and I know. That's not your line."

"Thank you very much for your opinion," said Molly loftily.

Their acquaintance had grown rapidly in the odd moments of conversation that they had had from time to time. He had discovered her, upon this occasion, out on the wharf at sunset. The tide was high, the breeze was keen, and a faint new moon hung in the pale green of the western sky. Molly had on her sweater. It was an old sweater, darned in one or two places, but she looked girlish and supple as she stood facing the wind. The lieutenant lounged against the railing in front of her. He was a graceful figure, his closely fitting coat buttoned tight about him, and his full plaid cap pulled well over his eyes. Molly couldn't help admiring him, though he had made her angry; and he, on his part, admired Molly, though he saw quite well the darns in her sweater. There was fire in her gray eyes that made them the more interesting, and a fine lift to her chin.

"There's no use getting wrought up about it," he said easily. "I'm just stating a fact, you know."

"I've often heard that you English could make yourselves particularly unpleasant by stating facts," she answered.

He shrugged his shoulders at that with a Latin, rather than an English air. "I've no doubt," he

said. "We English never deceive ourselves as to our talents, and it seems to us rather silly that other people should find any pleasure in doing so."

Molly realized the force of that remark, and insensibly she became less militant in posture and expression. "I think people should develop themselves in every line, even if they aren't geniuses," she argued.

"You're wrong there, believe me. That theory exploded before you were born, or I either, for that matter. Specialization is the only thing to think about nowadays. That's what I've done."

"In what line?" asked Molly, unbelieving.

His face broke into its quick smile. "In the world, the flesh, and the devil, some people call it."

"I'd rather stick to Beethoven, even though I do make a muddle of it," Molly said, with a touch of her scornful manner.

"You should specialize in men, that's your line," said the lieutenant.

"You think I am a man's woman?" she asked, and she was aware of a thrill of gratified vanity at the homage paid to her charms in his veiled glance. She knew she was not a man's woman, but she felt that he, at least, admired her.

"I think you could be anything you pleased."

"Except a musician," she amended.

"My aunt, who cares about a silly thing of that sort! You ought to go to London—you'd have men at your feet."

"I don't know that I should care to have a great

number at my feet; I couldn't marry them all," said Molly.

"Oh, marriage!" the lieutenant exclaimed. "Most of the fellows in London, you know, are like myself, they're not marrying men."

"Aren't they?" asked Molly, trying to cover the surprise that the statement excited in her. She had never before encountered a young, good-looking, well-placed, and apparently well-to-do young gentleman who announced that he was not a marrying man.

"You see, we have all of us expensive tastes," he added, by way of explanation.

"A man who doesn't marry because he has expensive tastes can't be very much in love," said Molly.

Again he shrugged his shoulders with that strange, foreign air that gave a touch of piquancy to his Anglicism. He walked about once or twice on the little platform. "You don't know anything about being in love," he announced dogmatically after the third turn.

"Probably not," she answered, and her manner was non-committal. Why, she scarcely knew, except that she felt herself observing some unwritten law in the game they seemed to be playing.

The lieutenant was right, she had never been in love. She had never before, indeed, had even a momentary responsive intercourse with a man of her own years, when each was conscious of the magnetic power of the other's personality. Conditions

had isolated her, but tendencies of nature are apt to dominate conditions, and Molly's reserve with Wrexham piqued his curiosity. He was a clever young man, and he had learned a great deal in the sophisticated, worldly school whose course he had followed with a zeal that quite balanced his lack of enthusiasm in pursuit of the classics. Yet, in all of his gay career he had never met a girl just like Molly—inexperienced, but poised, freighted with principle, but not heavy, above all things, good-looking, yet not vain. He was not familiar with the type, for it is not one that flourishes in the smart set, but he felt an unexplained liking for it. Instinctively he had hit upon the truth—Molly's line ran in the art of intercourse, not of music.

"She'll make some fellow a good wife," he caught himself reflecting as he looked at her.

In the meantime the crescent moon turned to silver, the river grew dark, and the salt breeze freshened from the sea.

"Isn't it beautiful?" cried Molly, with a sudden response to the outer world that she knew so well.

"Quite so," said Wrexham. "Shall I have a cigarette?"

"You can't light it in this wind," she declared.

"I shall manage if you will be so good as to hold my cap," he replied.

She took the cap and held it against the wind, and for the moment their attention was given to the little flame. Yet not entirely so. The flickering light brought out the vividness of the lieutenant's

coloring, suggested the length of his lashes, and threw just a touch of lustre upon the hair, brushed so carefully back from his brow.

Despite the changes of time and fashion, it remains to some minds a masculine moment—that of lighting a cigarette. Aware that he was being observed, the lieutenant prolonged it. He was certainly a beautiful young creature, yet Molly turned away.

“The young man, Absalom!” The words came into her mind quite unexpectedly. Wrexham was not a Jew, and he was not leading an insurrection—the connection was not there. She remembered vaguely something else: “From the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him.” He was not as perfect as that, to be sure; he had a weak heart, she knew, and there were certain nervous contractions of his features from time to time that told of the strain he had been under. Besides, his cheeks were a little too full, his mouth too small, yet his teeth were fine and white, and his smile had in it both delicacy and charm. His expression was, at times, however, almost Oriental in its mask-like quality. Taken altogether, the name seemed to suit him—“the young man, Absalom,” as fair, as charming, possibly as false. Molly, too, was shrewd in her own way. She had done a good deal of reading, some thinking, too—“the long, long thoughts of youth.”

“You are not like most Englishmen, are you?” she asked.

"A bit of an oddity, eh?"

"Eastern blood?" she suggested.

"Italian, two generations back. I'm the only one of my family, though, that shows it, and I'm English all right, in my sentiments. Oh, yes, quite so."

"Tell me about your family," said Molly impulsively.

"I haven't got any except a mother, and she's given me the frozen mitt for the past six months."

"Why?"

He occupied himself with his cigarette. "Oh, for one reason and another. You know I'm not a very exemplary character, and my mother and I sometimes disagree."

"You quarrelled?"

"My word, no! I've never quarrelled with my mother. We've never been rude to each other in our lives, but—well, I've expensive tastes, as I said before. Whenever she begins talking to me about money, though, I say to her: 'Let's cut that out. I'll send my lawyer to see yours.' It's much better to do it that way; we are too much alike to keep from disagreeing. Besides, there are other things," he said, and his voice had in it a suggestion of weariness and care. He raised his eyes and met her glance, and she realized that there was more in the lieutenant than she had fancied.

"You don't sound very happy in spite of the gay life you've been leading," said Molly gently.

"Happy? One is too occupied in London to

think of being happy. Besides, no one thinks of happiness now, anyway, with this hell of a war going on."

"Don't talk that way," Molly commanded.

"I beg your pardon. The war's not a subject one can speak of, then, to ladies. If your country had been in it as long as we have, you'd not talk of being happy—believe me."

Molly was silent. His tone was illuminating. As an American, she felt, in those December days, very theoretical and pictorial in her realization of war.

"Is your mother doing Red Cross work?" she asked at length.

"Oh, she's probably playing at it. My mother is beautiful, or so men say. One can hardly judge of one's own mother, you know. At any rate, she's the best-dressed woman in London, and very clever, very amusing. Oh, I enjoy dining with her very much indeed." Evidently, in his own way, the lieutenant took a certain satisfaction in his mother's triumphs. They were, at least, in line with his own ideals.

Suddenly Molly was aware of how simple her own style would appear in the sophisticated world that he had left. Even the moon lost some of its attraction, for the gleaming lights of London, seen by her fancy's eye, had a fascination in them kindled by the spell of the lieutenant's personality. He was of another world, truly, an old world, one that she had been wont to scorn somewhat. Yet, quite unex-

pectedly, its potency was made manifest. Here was the embodiment of its sophistication and its charm, its age set forth in youth, its subtlety in beauty. Suddenly she realized, too, what he must feel in the strangeness of this primitive setting, for Molly had the power of throwing herself into another's feeling and attitude of mind.

"How you must hate it here," she said.

He felt the sympathy of her perception and responded to it. Unconsciously, his voice had in it a gentler note. "Not here," he said, with an emphasis that she could not but understand; "this isn't half bad."

Molly knew that it was not. "But this can't last always," she said, and then she was aware that he might read more into the speech than she had intended.

Wrexham seldom made those mistakes. "My word, no. This is a water-hole in the plain," he said.

"A new moon and a spring-tide," Molly amended.

"The moon and the tide have nothing to do with it," he said, and he threw away the end of his cigarette. "Will you help me light another?" he asked.

"Not to-night. One is enough," said Molly.

"My aunt," he cried, "you American women are the limit! Miss Northrup, now, has peculiar views about where a man is to smoke and where not, and you suggest one cigarette for an evening."

"Not at all. You can smoke a thousand if you want to. I said I wouldn't help you light another;

that's all. Smoking is a sort of passion with you, isn't it?"

"Pretty much so—particularly since my physician has forbidden it. That makes the thing so deucedly interesting."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Molly.

"I've had too many opportunities for being that," he answered lightly, yet he took out his box of cigarettes and looked at it contemplatively. Suddenly he tossed it into the river. "That's a tribute to you," he said, as Molly turned to him in surprise. "There were exactly six left in it."

"Did you count them?" she asked.

"Yes. Ten minutes to each, a solid hour dedicated to thoughts of you."

"It will be an irritating experience."

"No doubt," he answered shortly. But somehow Molly was convinced of his sincerity—he would think of her for an hour, possibly longer. That was something of an impression to have made.

"You'll forget to pine for London for just that long," she said.

"Oh, I've sense enough to know I'm not missing much in London just now; there's nothing going on there. The theatres, of course, but while the war's on everything shuts up at midnight—dancing clubs, you know. Nobody's having any fun now. That's the way I look at it. The fellows who are not dead are in France, and those who are not fit are stuck around in corners somewhere."

"As you are," said Molly, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice. It was odd with what varying impulses his conversation inspired her.

The lieutenant resented the change of which she had made him aware, and again he gave an indifferent shrug of his shoulders.

Molly liked these foreign and dramatic mannerisms; they struck her girlish fancy with all the interest of the unaccustomed. Yet she knew that he intended to be disagreeable, and the intention made her angry.

"I am going in," she said curtly.

"To practise Beethoven, I dare say," he replied.

She made no answer, but went ahead of him down the narrow plank walk that led to the shore. She had a graceful figure, the darkness hid the darns in her sweater and the faded streak in her skirt. She walked well, and she carried her head with an air.

"My word, like a duchess," thought the lieutenant. "Or rather, not like one." He knew a duchess or two who happened not to have Molly's very excellent carriage.

Perhaps Molly's head was held just a trifle higher than usual. She was conscious that his gaze was upon her, conscious, also, that in the half-light she supported inspection remarkably well. She was, indeed, a new type to Wrexham. Certainly, he had not seen exactly her like before. Walking behind her, he became suddenly aware from her silence that she was annoyed, and he realized that his shrug had bordered upon rudeness.

The bow that he executed at her front step would have passed as correct in a drawing-room at Saint James's. "Good night," he said, "I shall retire to a smokeless revery."

"I hope you'll find it beneficial," she answered, and she gave him her hand.

"Believe me, it will be interesting," he declared.

After all, there was no use being really angry with him; he looked so well, bowing with such a polished air on the gravel path at the foot of the steps. The steps were worn, and they led to a somewhat ramshackle house—Molly's home. The light from the sitting-room window showed him very clearly against the dark background of shrubbery. He might have been the hero of any one of a dozen novels.

Molly went very slowly into the house. Never before had her accustomed surroundings appeared less lovely, for she seemed to view them with the lieutenant's critical, unprejudiced eye. Yet she despised herself in doing so. Had the home, so satisfying, so familiar, become undesirable to her merely because she had met a young foreigner who would laugh at its shabbiness, since he could not see the beauty that lay within?

"Where have you been, Molly?" her mother asked.

"Down on the pier with Mr. Wrexham," she said.

Her father looked up from his newspaper. "Is that the young idiot who boards next door at the Pentons'?"

"He's not just that," said Molly. She spoke in justice, not partisanship, her mother noticed.

"What makes you think so?" her father asked sceptically. He had confidence, though, in Molly's judgment.

"Well, he was at the battle of the Marne," said Molly.

She had used convincing argument, she knew. There were other things she might have said about Wrexham which would have given more logical denial to the charge made against him, but she realized that the one she had mentioned would be effective. It was the thought she kept in mind herself as a dramatic contrast to all of his amusing folly.

"Play me a tune," said her father.

"All right," said Molly, and a smile twitched unexpectedly at the corners of her mouth. She went straight to the old cracked piano and began the bit of Beethoven that she had practised all the morning.

She played it loud, louder than it should have been played, and Wrexham, next door, cried out in irritation, "Gad, she's at it again!" much to the entertainment of Robert and Jimmy Penton, whose mother had taken him to board.

CHAPTER V

LIEUTENANT WREXHAM was not what might be called a star boarder. He gave no end of trouble, quite without thinking about it. Every now and then, too, he broke a chair by bracing against the back, or dropping it out of the window when he wanted to put it on the lawn.

"It's your deuced American wood," he explained to his landlady, Mrs. Penton, a woman in whom the exigencies of life had developed considerable wisdom. Early in her acquaintance with Mr. Wrexham she decided that if she was to keep her newly secured boarder, it would be well not to report his words and deeds in too great detail to her husband. Being a woman, she, too, was not insensible to the lieutenant's charm, in spite of his lapses in courtesy and temper.

"The trouble is my home manners are devilish bad," he announced blandly.

"It wouldn't make so much difference," said Mrs. Penton, "if it wasn't for Robert and Jim."

"My word!" cried the lieutenant, "have I got to be an example to youth?"

"I hope not," Mrs. Penton answered, and looked at her boarder uncertainly.

"There's no use being low-spirited about it and expecting the worst," he told her. "Perhaps they'll

pick up my company manner instead, and that wouldn't be such a bad thing for them after all."

"That's not the way with boys," Mrs. Penton replied.

The lieutenant, however, thought she was mistaken. "Now, I picked up my father's manner," he said. "My father had some uncommonly bad habits, but I didn't take to them, I took his manner, which was rather good. Not that I haven't a bad habit or two, but they are my own, you know."

Mrs. Penton's face grew severe. "It's just that disrespectful way of speaking of your parents that I don't want them to get from you," she said.

"Oh, they won't," he answered easily. "You see, my parents didn't want respect; they thought it rather a bore."

Mrs. Penton wanted to say they probably didn't deserve it, but she refrained, whether from consideration for the lieutenant's feelings or from the fear that he would agree with her, she scarcely knew. She had good old-fashioned ideas of filial and parental relations, but she need not have feared that the airy references of Wrexham to his parents would affect the state of mind of her sons. Robert and Jim had been raised with that wholesome admixture of affection and the rod which previous generations found so helpful. They loved their mother, and though, upon occasion, they feared her, their spirit was not broken, as some people seem to think the spirit of little boys must be, when their small per-

sons are sometimes touched up with a switch. They did not like Mr. Wrexham very much, but they found him entertaining.

"You ought to see him in the mornin'," Robert told Molly. "He don't want nobody to speak to him till he's had somethin' to eat, and me and Jim get outside of his room and make a noise, and sometimes he puts his head out before he's slicked it down, and his hair is all standin' out every which ways. Gee, he looks funny!"

"What does he say?" asked Molly, who did not hesitate to pump Robert on the subject.

"He hollers out a lot of things; Jim says it's French or Spanish or somethin'. Jim says it's cursin' so's we can't understand it."

"Well, that's all right, if you can't understand it. Isn't it?" asked Molly.

"I guess so," Robert replied. "I wish I could curse in every kind of language," he said reflectively. "I'd holler out things and mother wouldn't know what I said."

"She'd know you were cursing though, pretty quick," Molly warned him.

"I reckon so," said Robert, and it was plain that he reconsidered the matter of linguistic study. "Mr. Wrexham says: 'Hand me the wolls,'" he announced, with a sudden laugh of remembrance.

Molly joined in. "Hand me the wolls! Oh, Robert, you're joking."

"No, I ain't, you can ask mother," said Robert. He liked to talk, and Molly's interest in his remarks

was flattering. Mrs. Penton had sent Robert to Molly's house on a borrowing errand, and he was tarrying by the way.

"You ought to seen how mad he was when you began playin' that piece last night!" he declared.

"Was he?" said Molly in delight.

Robert observed her silently, believing that he had discovered a new ally in the amusing war upon the boarder.

It was not surprising that the lieutenant should have excited very general attention in that little community, that pleasant quiet nook, where individuality counted, and little boys and even indigenuous negroes bore a part in making up the social interests of life. Celia's return, though of greater real import to the neighborhood than the lieutenant's transitory visit, was yet rivalled by it in public thought. This may have been because Celia's roots had always run in that soil. She had simply reappeared in surroundings where she was native; she suited the place, and the place suited her. But Wrexham was truly foreign to the locality, and remained so. As Molly had said, he was an excrescence upon the landscape—a personality for whom there seemed no part in the general scheme of things. He could not be assimilated, and he did not desire assimilation.

Be that as it may, he had stumbled upon an interest, an unexpected and rather vital one—Molly. Celia realized that when next he dropped in for tea. Molly had, indeed, caught his fancy. Yet

his fancy was fitful, Celia reflected. She herself was a less disturbing element, socially as pleasantly stimulating to him as the tea which she dispensed.

"We've got nothing like her in London; she's good, you know, and she's pretty, and she has something to say. Besides, she has a will of her own."

"You like her," said Celia.

"Very much," said the lieutenant, and added, with that foreign frankness which was part of his charm: "She's a bit of a novelty." He knew himself fairly well for a young man of his years.

Celia felt a little uncertain as to the desirability of his acquaintance for Molly. She had confidence in the girl's level-headedness, and yet, if she herself were so pleasantly affected by him, what must be Molly's frame of mind, upon whom more concentrated attention was probably brought to bear?

"When I go back to England—" the lieutenant said suddenly.

Celia interrupted him quickly. "If you go back to England you'll have to go into the army again."

The dignity of his glance advised her of her mistake. "I am in the army," he said simply.

"I mean, you'll have to go back to France," she answered.

He shook his head. "I shan't go to France if I can help it; I shall be detailed for work in London. Somebody will have to stay in London, why shouldn't I?" There was a calmness about all of his decisions relative to himself. "After all," he added, "with the

Huns making Zeppelin raids, there's a fair chance of being killed in London."

Miss Northrup did not deny that, yet she could have wished him more heroic. Oddly enough, though, it seemed not his courage that was in question. He suggested a blandly selfish determination to enjoy life, after the annoyances he had already experienced. "What were you saying you would do when you go back to London?" she asked.

"Get that girl a job," he replied promptly. "Oh, it's just a fancy, I've no idea she would take it, but there's no sort of use in her wasting her time in this little hole. What do you imagine she does by the hour? Hammers out an old bally thing of Beethoven's on that tin box of a piano she's got over there. And all because she thinks she's improving herself—with no sort of talent to improve. That girl is clever, you know, and she'd make a stunning-looking woman—in the proper clothes."

"I rather like her clothes; they suit her," said Celia.

The lieutenant grew excited at such a perverted idea. "Why, they're scarcely clothes at all," he said. "They're—they're garments, that's what they are." He seemed to think that he had found the word that best described Molly's apparel.

Celia laughed. She felt that she could not explain to him the artistic fitness of the simple, old-fashioned clothes which Molly wore with so much individuality. Molly herself could not see it. Celia reflected that such æsthetic perception is sel-

dom given to youth, even the sophisticated youth of Wrexham's type.

"Suppose she had some up-to-date raiment, then, what sort of job would you get for Molly?" she asked.

"Oh, I was thinking she's the kind of girl the British Secret Service people ought to get hold of," he answered.

"Molly Hunter!" Celia thought of the extremely simple conditions that had surrounded Molly all her days. "But she's not accustomed to that sort of life," she said lamely.

"She's deuced clever, and she'd understand it fast enough. Besides, she's very pretty, and she looks like a lady."

"She is a lady," Celia asserted.

"Essentially, yes. That would be the only obstacle. Yet it would be a long shot better for her to go to London and get a nice fat income from the government, than to stay here in this little old pond, hammering on that piano that she'll never learn how to play."

"Did you tell her so?"

"I told her that she'd never play well enough for anybody to listen to."

"But about the secret service—did you tell her that?"

"Do you think I've no tact?"

Celia was not sure, in view of his remark about the music, but she did not dispute the question.

"You think she would have been angry, then?"

"She would have been, if she had understood just what it was that I was suggesting."

"Have you done that sort of thing yourself?" Celia asked, with a sudden widened vision of Wrexham's career.

"Oh, I've done a bit. Now and again they want a fellow to do it who's not known. I rather like it—roam about the docks and stumble into a public house. Socialist business."

"I should think your general air would give you away."

He did not suggest the ordinary socialist, nor the average public house. He wore a sprig of red casino berry that afternoon in the lapel of his gray coat.

"You've got to be darned careful," he said. "Tie up your neck in a woollen scarf, and wear muddy boots—that sort of thing."

"But are the army officers expected to do secret-service work?"

"Oh, no, it's quite voluntary, but we do it for a change, a sort of throw off. I did a good deal of it. You see, I look like a bit of an ass. My cousin, Lord Putney, said to me: 'Dicky, my boy, you look like a cherub when you're asleep,' and I dare say it's true. These people would shy if they thought a fellow had sense enough to get on to them, so they tell me at the Foreign Office I'm peculiarly suited to the part." He smiled appreciatively as he settled his narrow tie. "They gave me a woman once; she was a Spaniard. It was at the time

Alphonso visited London, and the government was blooming scared that something was going to happen to him. She was a beautiful woman."

"An anarchist?"

"No, a Carlist. She'd a man with her, and I had to get him out of the way and take her out to dinner and to the theatre—all that bunk. I spent twenty pound on that woman, and I didn't learn a thing about her. You have to be deuced clever to do it."

Miss Northrup looked at him uncertainly. Somehow there seemed to her a difference between tracking anarchists through the London slums, and dining with a woman in order to find her off her guard, and she said so.

He thought it merely a distinction without a difference. "That woman would have killed Alphonso; she was arrested in Paris two months later. A very charming fellow, the King of Spain, but we were uncommonly glad when he got back to Madrid. If he's to be blown to bits, it would be rather hard that England should be held responsible."

He grew reflective, and finished his tea in silence. "Oh, well, it's exciting," he went on half sadly. "One has to do something to keep up the game."

He stood before her, graceful, well-groomed. "A darling of the gods," Celia said as she looked up at him.

The light left his face. "I?" he said, and turned away. "Call me anything you like, but not that. The sport of circumstance would be better."

"You don't look it," she objected.

"That, too, is part of the game," he answered, and shrugged his shoulders.

Celia marvelled, for his face seemed older, in spite of the rich color of his hair and eyes and the firm contour of his cheek.

"There's a sameness in it all," he said with a sigh.

"Then why not break away from it now, before you grow old?"

"Oh, I shall never grow old," he exclaimed. "I shall always be on the go—fifty years from now, a little puffy under the eyes, perhaps, and a bit fat, but still going the rounds." He laughed as he spoke, but there was none of his usual gayety in his voice. "What difference does it make, though, after all? I'm not a marrying man—I can't be, with the income I've got. You know what free trade has done to the British landholder, and, my aunt, this war has knocked everybody's income into bobs. Anyway, I don't know that I've a very great leaning toward marriage as it's usually carried out. Of course I go about with a lot of women—actresses, most of them. They're a jolly little set, and they've some pep to them. Beautiful dancers, too," he said meditatively. He had evidently discriminated though in his intercourse with them, for he added, after a moment: "I don't go with chorus girls. Oh, I know a lot of them. I say: 'Hello, old girl,' and I dance with them, but I don't dine with them—not alone. Oh, no. They're all for marriage."

"You don't trust yourself, then?" Celia asked in amusement.

"Well, I've known too many fellows who got tangled up—good name and all that, in the Guards, too."

"Yet you do consider the possibility of marrying after all."

"My word, there's always a possibility," he answered. "But this matter of domesticity doesn't suit me at all—so much a log for the chicken. Give me a good café, and a woman who's clever enough to take care of herself, like Edie, now, Edie Ingram. I dare say I shall marry Edie some day if she wants me to."

"That's rather an unpleasant way to put it, isn't it?"

"Oh, well, Edie is very respectable," said the lieutenant meditatively. "And, after all, why not? She's a clever little dancer, and she makes eighty pound a week. Oh, people go mad about Edie, you should see her. Edie would really suit me very well in the long run."

"I think so, too," Miss Northrup agreed with some sharpness. "Would your mother like that?"

"My mother? No, she would hate it. But, as I told her, if I should marry Edie we'd get some brains in the family again—in the male line, I mean, my mother, of course, is very clever. So I should really be something of a benefactor to my race. I may marry her when I go back to England, you see, Edie has got this idea of being respectable firmly fixed in her head."

"I don't think she'll have you," Miss Northrup said decidedly.

"Possibly not; but if she does, I shall go on the stage with her. I did a corking part for a week or so in London, after I got out of hospital, and Edie said it was pretty good. Some of the society people went into the thing for the Belgian fund, and we made a lot of money. I introduced a song a fellow I knew in the music-halls used to sing. I asked him for it and he said: 'You've the hell of a voice, Dicky, but if you want the thing, as it's for a good cause, you can go ahead.' So I did—a song and a dance—and it went very well."

"I should like to have seen you," said Celia, confident that the lieutenant's manner and appearance might well have offset his musical shortcomings.

"An odd thing happened to me the other day," he said suddenly. "I met a fellow back in the woods here, and he said to me: 'I've seen you before.' 'Very possibly,' I said, for I've no fancy for strangers who fall on one's neck in out-of-the-way places simply because they've seen one before. But he wouldn't be put off. He said: 'I think I saw you in London.' 'Probably,' I said, 'I live in London,' and I was short with the man. But then he looked at me and he said: 'You did a song and dance at the Prince of Wales's Theatre for war relief?' Well, do you know my heart warmed to that man, and I grant you, I was a bit surprised."

"You met him in the woods here!" Celia cried.

"Yes. A very clever chap; pleasant-looking fel-

low, a bit oldish, living in a little tin sort of tub turned upside down."

"Oh, the tin man. What is he doing here?"

"I didn't ask him, but he's got some sort of puff boat, or something of the kind, and he's running up and down the coast with it. He took me with him one morning, and we had rather a jolly time of it."

"But he must have some object in sailing about," Celia objected.

"I don't remember what he said. You Americans are always so keen about wanting to know what people are doing. Possibly something was said about locating oyster-beds, and making maps for the government, but I can't say exactly. You see, we were talking about London most of the time."

"What is it that English people want to find out first about a stranger?" Celia inquired.

"Why, we ask who he is, we never think about what he's doing."

"Well, who is he?" she demanded.

"I can't remember exactly—Wilton or Milton, or something of the kind. Your American names don't mean very much, after all, so perhaps that's the reason you don't think of them."

"You liked him, though," said Celia.

"Yes. An odd sort of chap—I should call him a gentleman, though, even in England."

Celia laughed; she could not help it. She did not even try to discuss the subject of American gentlemen with him, for the lieutenant's opinions

had evidently been firmly established on the other side of the water.

"I'll bring him in for tea some afternoon, if I can get him to come," he announced with English frankness as to fact.

"Very well; tell him there'll be cake," said Celia, who accepted facts herself. Nevertheless, she fancied the description of the tin man that the lieutenant had given.

CHAPTER VI

THE name was Weldon, John Weldon, and the man was very much absorbed in his work, which, as Wrexham had said, had something to do with coast survey and oyster-beds. He explored in his motor-boat by day, and he made maps in his tin house by night, and, occupied in that way, he found life pleasant enough and very simple. There were no problems and no cares. He was not a man to whom problems were apt to present themselves, however, for he did not concern himself with speculation; there was, and always had been, some activity which seemed to claim his attention. He came of good people, he had a good education, and the work he was doing was well suited to his self-reliance and to the simplicity of his nature, besides being of distinct importance to his government. He felt satisfaction in that fact, for a declaration of war reveals values previously unnoted.

Weldon had knocked around a good deal, usually in out-of-the-way nooks, for he liked solitude, and he could always look out for himself. The love of the unconventional had grown upon him, though; he had begun to realize that. Yet there was no reason why he should not live his life as he pleased; there were no ties, no demands upon him. He was, as the lieutenant had also said, oldish, and he had begun to understand about the scope of his own powers

and his own temperament. Since he had missed the big things of life he had accepted the fact with some philosophy, and had settled down, at least to a condition that he liked. He was not a brilliant figure, but in spite of his peculiarities, nobody ever mistook him for anything but a man and, again to quote the lieutenant, a gentleman. People are apt to speak of the "indefinable something" by which a gentleman may be distinguished; with Weldon it was the poise and simplicity with which he did and said what occurred to him, together with the fact that it never occurred to him to be uncouth.

The singularity of his meeting with young Wrexham attracted the two men to each other. Weldon offered the hospitality of the motor-boat and the tin house, which the lieutenant, finding time hard to dispose of, accepted with alacrity. They were singularly mismatched, but they seemed to derive considerable pleasure from each other's society.

"I can't get over your recognizing me, bang off, just from seeing me in that skit at the Prince of Wales's," Wrexham declared.

"I always notice faces," said Weldon, "besides, as I don't go to shows often, I remember what I see."

"My word, it's fellows like you that make the Guards seem like opera bouffe," the lieutenant exclaimed.

"There was no opera bouffe on the French battle-front when you were there, was there?" the other asked pointedly.

"Oh, I say, you people make too much of all that bunk. Of course, it isn't pleasant, but one goes because one has to, and when one's in the thing it's a long shot easier to fight than it is to run. Believe me, you can't run with your men looking on. Oh, no!"

"Did you ever bag a German?" Weldon asked, his eyes on the boat's head, for they were rounding the shoals that ran out from a marshy point.

Young Wrexham stretched himself in graceful lines along the narrow deck. "I can't say that I killed any of them, but I can't say that I didn't," he answered. "Indeed, I think it's rather probable that I may have killed quite a lot of them," he went on after a puff or two at his cigarette. "We had a sudden attack one night, in a little town in France, and I can remember standing in the middle of a street and popping off my pistol as fast as I could. I don't know how we got into the thing, nor how we got out, but it was rather lively—black night and every one shooting. We lost nine officers that night."

Weldon's calm, keen glance rested admiringly upon the lieutenant. It seemed inconceivable that the languid-looking youth should actually have been through such experiences.

Wrexham sustained the glance with complacency; he enjoyed the impression he was making. "It was most disagreeable," he said. "I've a piece that I wrote about it when I first came to this country. They sent a fellow from a newspaper to interview me,

but he didn't know a musket from a mortar battery, so I wrote the thing out for him. He fixed it up a lot, and spelled the words right, you know. Oh, it's a regular write-up—got a picture of me, too."

"I'd like to see it," said Weldon.

Wrexham said he'd bring it down to the tin house, and then he remembered he had promised to show it to Celia. He remembered, too, that he had suggested bringing Weldon in to tea.

"By the way," he said, "there's a very charming woman in the little green house that's bang on the road as you go by to the dock, and I've engaged to take you there to tea."

A slow smile broke over Weldon's face. "You'll have to disengage, then," he remarked with finality. "I'm not the kind that charming women take to, and I don't shine at afternoon tea-tables."

"Oh, but she's keen on having you," the lieutenant insisted. "She said I must tell you there'd be cake."

Weldon laughed. He liked that message; besides, he had a fondness for cake, and he did not make it in the tin house. He looked down at himself rather speculatively. "I don't know that I could make much of an appearance," he said. "I didn't come on this expedition to go in for society."

Wrexham turned his attention upon him also. Weldon was one of those men who never make a dashing appearance, there was even nothing picturesque about him as he piloted his boat. He looked competent, but not striking. The lieutenant

liked him, though—indeed, there was something eminently likable about the man.

“Oh, you’ll do,” Wrexham said easily.

“I never was much of a sport,” Weldon said, and he failed to see the humor of an admission so unnecessary. “You fellows in the Guards have to do a lot of dressing, I suppose,” he said, and his eyes rested upon the blue silk socks and the well-cut canvas shoes so prominently displayed upon the deck.

“Rather,” said the lieutenant. “And, believe me, those tunics fit; some of the fellows wear stays. I don’t do that; I think it’s a bit effeminate, you know.”

Weldon’s glance expressed derision, and Wrexham felt called upon to justify the practice.

“You see, the King is very particular. The tunics can’t have any wrinkles about them, for the Guards have to look smart. That’s their business—to look smart.”

“I sort of like your King. He’s not much to look at, but I’d be the last one to chalk that up against a man,” Weldon said.

“How about a woman?” the lieutenant asked with a smile.

“I like ’em pretty,” Weldon admitted, “and yet,” he added after a moment’s reflection, “the one I—that is, I have known women who were very attractive without being what some people call pretty.”

Wrexham puffed at his cigarette and smiled as he received that remark. Weldon had not meant

it as a confidence, but he perceived that it bore that aspect, and he got back to the more neutral ground of the lieutenant's experiences with a very decided jerk of the conversation.

"Ever meet the King?" he asked.

"The King and I are not very intimate."

"You don't like him?"

"Like him! That's hardly the expression to use in regard to one's King. I admire him very much, indeed; he knows his job, and he's got a charming manner. I see him every day when I'm on duty at the palace, but I never spoke to him until I was in hospital in London after the retreat. He came through, and talked to all the men—shook hands. Very gracious, very charming manner. Of course, I know he's no better than anybody else, still—oh, well, there's a difference. One can't expect him to be as democratic as you people are."

"That's what I couldn't stand in royalty," Weldon said slowly.

"It's all in what one is accustomed to," the lieutenant answered. "Now, you are really a very nice sort. Believe me, in England you'd be the kind of chap to think it a crime not to stand up when the band played 'God Save the King!'"

Weldon laughed. He found the young man's observations amusing. He was shrewd enough, too, to estimate Wrexham at something more than the very evident surface value of his charms of manner and of person, and the sparkle of his conversation. He felt something deeper in the man, and he liked

him for the suggested force, though he suspected it would never be strong enough to dominate his nature. Weldon heard the minor note of futile protest that it gave against a life so inconsequent; he saw, too, the falseness of the standards by which the lieutenant's youth had been surrounded. It was of these things that he thought as he held the wheel and listened to the young man's stories while they cut through the salt stream under the blue December sky. His own youth rose in remembrance, with its wholesome environment, and he looked with indulgence upon the lieutenant.

"I say, you really would have made an uncommonly nice Englishman," Wrexham said suddenly, "the kind one doesn't mind being related to—an uncle, or something of the sort."

"Much obliged," said Weldon shortly; "I don't know that I should have been able to afford the position."

"Oh, it doesn't take much for that, believe me," the lieutenant exclaimed with some acerbity. "Now, my uncle, Lord Elmerdon, has money, but he's never given me any—half a crown now and then, when I was a child, but not any more. Whenever I meet him he says: 'Hello, Dicky. Any debts?' 'You bet your life,' I say; 'going to help me out?' 'Oh, no,' he says; 'you don't need it, your mother's rich.' 'Well,' I say, 'suppose she is, that doesn't do me any good.' But Elmerdon laughs; he has no idea of parting with his coin."

Wrexham rose and stretched himself; he could

do it very effectually, for he was pliant and supple. Weldon was as different from him in physique as in temperament and manner; there was a stockiness about Weldon that made for strength, rather than grace, a certain compactness of build that gave him stamina. They were oddly assorted as companions, from every point of view, and yet they were rather drawn to each other.

"You've seen a good deal of life," Weldon commented.

"If you said vice, you'd come nearer to it," the other suggested.

"It's vice that palls," said Weldon.

"Oh, yes, one gets fed up with it," Wrexham agreed, and sighed.

"Why don't you do something?"

"Oh, my aunt! Every one pushes that bunk at me." He lit another cigarette and walked up to the bow. "There's one thing you people have got here, and you never say anything about it. You blow about everything else, but you never speak of your skies. My word, these blue skies! I never heard you had them when I was in Europe."

Weldon threw a weather-eye aloft. "The wind's changing," he said, and then quite suddenly he made the proposal that had flashed into his mind. "Suppose you let me engage you as a hand around the boat?"

"My word, why don't you get a nigger?" the lieutenant exclaimed.

"I was going to, but I'd rather have you."

"I say, you're remarkably flattering," the young man remarked, but it was evident that the proposition struck him rather pleasantly. "I'm not particularly fit," he said after a moment. "If I were, you know, I shouldn't be here."

"Yes, I know," said Weldon. "I rather think this kind of work will do you good."

"Believe me, you people are set on doing me good; I'm getting fed up with it. If I ship before the mast in your little coffee-pot of a boat, it'll be for my own amusement, and I shall get out of doing everything I don't like." The lieutenant had a very haughty air, and Weldon felt as though he were engaging one of the royal line as a handy man. The situation struck him as amusing, but he did not smile. The Englishman, indeed, thought him rather obtuse. "A nice sort, but a bit slow."

A good many people misjudged Weldon; his face was somewhat immobile, and his nervous poise was remarkably good. It was Wrexham who laughed.

"My aunt, I should advise you to get a nigger," he said.

"No doubt I should do better, but you liven things up a little."

"Oh, that's another matter. If I'm taken on as a jester, a sort of court fool, that's more in my line. I'll try it, though, because, you know, I rather like you."

"All right," said Weldon, and he turned the wheel hard to port. "We'll run in here," he said, "and you can make ready with the anchor."

"I don't care for that anchor business," the lieutenant replied, but he got himself with agility to the bow, and did as he was directed. As the rope ran out he stood looking at it reflectively. "That's the first bit of what is called honest toil I've ever done in my life. Oh, I've done a lot of things, you know—in automobiles, and boats too, but I've never made any money by them, and I dare say I made tuppence dropping that weight."

"Let's discuss the matter of pay," said Weldon.

Wrexham found the sensation of having a definite occupation distinctly pleasurable. He had, besides, a virtuous feeling, the first he had ever experienced. Fortified by it, he presented himself at Molly's door that very night.

Molly was not accustomed to having callers. The night was cold, and there was only one fire in the Hunters' simple establishment. Robert and Jimmy were there from next door, and Molly and the boys, and two half-grown Hunters were cracking hickory-nuts on the hearth with a flat-iron and a hammer. Mr. Hunter was reading the belated morning paper, and his wife was sewing. Wrexham's knock was startling.

"Who can that be?" Mr. Hunter exclaimed as he pushed back his chair.

Molly knew who it was; she put up a hand to smooth her hair, and to adjust the blue ribbon beneath her low-cut collar. It was then her mother noticed that the ribbon was Molly's new one. It gave a pretty touch of color and set off well the

delicate flesh-tones of her throat; there was a soft glow in her cheeks, and her blond hair seemed almost chestnut in the depths of its waving mass. Perhaps it was only the firelight that cast its spell over Molly, but she looked very entrancing as she sat on the little stool and picked out the hickory-nuts Jimmy presented to her.

"It's Lieutenant Wrexham," Mr. Hunter announced.

"Oh, shucks!" Jimmy muttered.

Mr. Wrexham did not care for Molly's father; he decided at once that "old Hunter" was not a gentleman—and he was not entirely so, in the conventional sense. Poor Hunter had not had the proper start, and yet his wife, quiet, worn, colorless, was a lady.

The lieutenant took in these matters with the nicety of observation which was his gift, a gift cultivated, however, by the life of his world. His bows showed an excess of formality, his face assumed its most rigid expression of convention.

"My daughter tells me you've been fighting in France," Mr. Hunter began with interest.

"Yes," said the lieutenant. He felt no desire to converse with this person.

"I reckon it was sort of warm there."

"Quite so," the young man agreed, his face as blankly non-committal as before.

"The fellow's a fool," Mr. Hunter decided.

His wife intervened: "It must be exceedingly lonely for you over here, Mr. Wrexham," she said, and he liked the way she said it.

He smiled. "One shouldn't think of that when one is so exceedingly safe," he answered.

Mrs. Hunter was aware of the sense of pleasure that the deference and polish of his manner gave. She loved her husband, but she had lived to deplore the lacks in him which her early infatuation had condoned.

"Remarkable marriage," thought Wrexham.

Yet, there was Molly, "nothing like her in England"; and though there probably are very many like her, the type, at least, had not shown itself in the lieutenant's circle.

"Do you like hickory-nuts?" she asked.

"I very probably should like them if I had the chance," he replied, and he got up and stood by the chimney, looking down at Molly.

She took Robert's stool away from him, and told the lieutenant to sit down. It was all very simple, yet he had never had an evening just like it, and he said a lot of funny things about the nuts. At least, they must have been funny, for Molly laughed, and so did the half-grown Hunters and the little boys. Afterward, though, he could not remember anything worth while that he had said. But, to use his own expressions, they were rather jolly, and every one seemed to be feeling remarkably fit.

Sometimes he said things low to Molly, and Molly said things low to him, and though little boys do not approve of such conduct, even Jimmy found Mr. Wrexham agreeable. It was indeed Mr. Wrexham who made that evening. Molly, with the Pen-

ton boys and her brothers, had cracked hickory-nuts by the fire before, but there had not been this sparkle to the happy hour.

"I've been taking your advice," he said in one of his asides to Molly. "I've got a job."

She looked up quickly. "Where?"

He saw, or fancied he saw, a shadow of regret fall across her face. He occupied himself with a hickory-nut, and enjoyed the situation.

"Look here, what's this," said Robert, inspired to propound the riddle which he had laboriously learned, "Whitey sent whitey to drive whitey out of whitey?"

"Oh, who don't know that!" Jimmy exclaimed.

"It sounds very remarkable," Mr. Wrexham said, "and anyway, you know, I'm rather a bonehead about riddles."

"He couldn't guess it; cotton don't grow in England," said one of the small Hunters.

Then Robert wanted to know how he knew it didn't grow there, and under cover of the discussion Wrexham said to Molly: "I've shipped before the mast."

Molly caught her breath. "You don't mean that, really!"

"Isn't that the sort of thing you wanted me to do?"

"I?" said Molly. It excited her to think that she had influenced him, and yet she saw no reason for believing that she had done so. Besides, she was not sure that this was what she would have advised. "Are you going at once?" she asked.

The lieutenant did not answer; he threw her a flattering glance instead, and his voice was lower than ever as he said: "If I had been going, I'd pull out of it after I'd seen you to-night."

"I heard what you said to Molly," Robert cried out in glee.

A blush swept over Molly's face, but the lieutenant seemed in no way disturbed. He leaned over and took the large piece of nut that Robert had just extracted from its shell, so the laugh was turned on Robert, and only the lieutenant himself saw the color deepening in Molly's cheek. She got up with some annoyance.

"When did you say you were going away, Mr. Wrexham?" she asked coolly.

"Oh, you're not going away, are you?" the young Hunters cried.

"Not just yet," said the lieutenant, and he, too, rose and faced Molly on the other side of the fireplace. He rather hated to leave the little circle, in spite of the impossible father in the background. The evening had had for him a very delightful flavor.

"My aunt, I'm getting rather mild," he thought to himself, as he strolled along by the river, before he turned in for the night.

"But that girl's got a nice skin," he reflected, and Molly's face came before his fancy's eye.

"My aunt!" he said again, and no further elucidated his meaning.

CHAPTER VII

WELDON was right; the wind had changed. It brought in a curtain of cloud, and by morning the weather was cold and rainy. The grayness and the sleety drizzle oddly changed the aspect of the country. The moss seemed funereal, as, dark and wet, it hung from the creaking oaks and moved heavily in the wind. The gay-colored leaves of yesterday were blown down, and looked sodden enough in the bare thicket. The marsh was but a dreary expanse, beyond which the river, sullen and slate-colored, merged into the cloud. Back of Celia's house the pines mourned a continuous melancholy accompaniment to the eerie song of the wind. The smoke curling upward from her chimney was the only cheerful sign in all that little world. It was a day for the fireside.

"I was afraid we were not going to have enough cold weather to let us burn up our wood," said Celia.

Mrs. Lovell was established in the chimney-corner. She had an afghan wrapped around her shoulders in addition to her shawl; it hampered her movements somewhat, but she was still crocheting.

"I'm sure I don't know why you want to burn up your wood," she remarked. She could not always follow Celia's train of thought.

"I'd think the winter wasted if I couldn't burn it," said Celia.

"H'm," said Mrs. Lovell, and she pulled the blanket more closely about her. "Is there a door open back there?" she called to Lizzie in the kitchen.

"I jis bin out on the piazza, ma'am, to git in another log," Lizzie called back.

"Keep the fire blazing, Lizzie," Celia directed.

"Yes'm, I is," answered the girl.

"Talk about the energy that cold weather gives, I can't do anything but huddle over the fire," said Celia. She was knitting—an endless thing of gray wool. A hundred thousand American women were probably similarly employed at the same moment. Such work is well suited to a winter day.

Mrs. Lovell finished her scallop. It was in keeping with her general inadequacy that she should continue to crochet lace in the face of the crying need for sweaters. Her comment on the weather was deflected by the clicking of the front gate.

Celia glanced from the window. "It's Robert," she exclaimed.

Sure enough, Robert, in the overcoat that used to be Jimmy's, was coming up the path.

"He's a faithful little fellow," said Celia. "I'd forgotten all about the engine."

"Do you think he runs that thing just right?" Mrs. Lovell asked uneasily.

"Did you ever see him do it?" Celia inquired in reply.

"There'd be no good in my seeing him, for I don't

understand machinery," the older lady said as she rounded a corner.

"I don't either," said Celia, "but Robert does. I might persuade Mr. Wrexham to do it, though, if you'd rather," she added with a smile.

"My soul and body, no!" Mrs. Lovell exclaimed more emphatically than was her habit. She did not take to Mr. Wrexham. She even hazarded the opinion that he was not "all there," which, oddly enough, had she but known it, was exactly his estimate of herself—"A good old duffer, you know, but dippy." Now Mrs. Lovell was not "dippy," and Wrexham was entirely "there"; both of which facts go to prove that people widely differing in gifts are scarcely qualified to estimate each other.

Robert came bounding up the steps and on to the piazza. He opened the front door and stuck in his head. "Here's kitty," he said.

"Come in and shut the door," Mrs. Lovell called.

Celia went out to join her visitors. "Kitty," she called.

"Shut the door," Mrs. Lovell again commanded.

Robert pulled the front door shut with a bang.

"That child will break every pane of glass in the house," the good lady thought.

Celia was occupied with Orion. He was leaping over the brush in the next field as he came to join them. "He's soaking wet, Robert," she said.

Orion came up with loud purrs. His coat was wet but his heart was warm. His fur was thick, almost shaggy, a sort of storm-coat, and he had

roughed it up for better protection from the weather. He rubbed against Celia's feet, and wet her thin stockings and slippers.

"Oh, no, kitty," she said, and drew back from his demonstrations.

"Let's take him inside," Robert suggested, and catching Orion about the middle, held him firmly under his arms.

The big cat made no resistance, but looked up pleasantly at his friends until Celia opened the door. Then he wriggled himself loose from Robert's clutch, and leaped to the piazza floor. The weather outside was not particularly agreeable, but he was quite able to take it as it came; he had come up, as usual, for companionship, that cold gray morning, not for shelter. He knew where to get shelter that suited him well enough, and he preferred to maintain the independence of his manner of life, even though it might be at some cost to his comfort.

"All the hot air is going out," Mrs. Lovell called from within.

Celia drew Robert inside. "We'll get him some milk," she said, as Orion looked his disappointment at their withdrawal.

"Milk's too tame for him," said Robert.

He was mistaken; Orion partook with evident relish of the milk that was set before him in the corner of the piazza where the rain did not blow in. The times were hard, and in such weather he found difficulty in making his usual collections. It was not the first occasion upon which he had availed

himself of Celia's hospitality; he was, indeed, beginning to have a comfortable sense of dependence upon the little green house as a source of possible supply in emergency.

Robert, with greater wisdom, was seated on the floor by the fire within. His wet feet were stretched to the blaze, so were his numb little fingers, and his overcoat was spread on a chair to dry. Mrs. Lovell had peeled it off him, a feat which she could scarcely have accomplished, however, without Robert's assistance, for he pulled in one direction while she pulled in the other. Jimmy's old overcoat was rather a tight fit for Robert. It was early, but Celia produced a stick of peppermint, which he absorbed with no reflection as to the hour.

The coming of Robert was an event on such a morning. He got out his mouth-organ when he had finished the candy, and it was merely the unremitting zeal with which he gave himself to the rendition of "Home, Sweet Home," that decided Celia to speed him upon his way. The two ladies got him into his coat again so he could go out to crank the engine. That was the object of his visit, but he had almost forgotten it in the genial warmth of Celia's fire.

There was something else that had been forgotten also. Robert stood around for a minute after the overcoat had been put on.

"It's Sat'day," he said suggestively.

Celia suddenly realized the force of his remark. "Why, it's pay-day, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes'm," said Robert promptly as he took out his little pocketbook. "Ain't got but five pennies left," he remarked.

"You had fifteen cents day before yesterday," Mrs. Lovell exclaimed.

"I gave Jimmy five cents for his slinger, and then I bought six choc'lates for a nickel up to the store."

"Well, if you will eat up your money, you can't keep it to buy a steamboat," said Celia.

"I didn't eat 'em all," Robert explained. "I didn't eat but two. I gave one to mother, and one to Jimmy, and one to Molly, and then I lost one in the well. But I can get more to-morrow without payin' money for 'em," he said with a beaming face.

"How?" Celia inquired.

"Mr. Wrexham," he answered promptly. "He's bought a pound, and he's goin' to give me and Jimmy one every mornin' when we don't make a noise and wake him up."

"Did you get one to-day?" she asked.

"I'm goin' to, when he gets up."

"My soul and body," Mrs. Lovell cried, "when he gets up!"

"He's 'wake," Robert remarked. "He hollered to Jimmy to make a fire in his room, but Jimmy wouldn't do it."

Celia laughed; she found great entertainment in hearing of Wrexham's difficulty in adjusting himself to primitive conditions.

Robert's visit made a pleasant break in the quiet morning; the ladies soon found themselves somewhat dull without him.

"A child's a great deal of company," said Mrs. Lovell with a sigh.

Celia detected the melancholy note in the reflection. "You can't have their company without the trouble and the noise they make," she said briskly.

"That's so," the older lady agreed. She was static in temperament, and found that the occupation of crocheting lace gave her the maximum return in interest for the minimum expenditure of effort.

Celia herself decided to write letters. And so the day passed pleasantly enough, though the rain did not abate—it was really half sleet—and the cold increased. Occasionally some poor negro passed on the road, a crocus sack thrown over his head and shoulders as protection from the rain.

"You'll have to lend Lizzie your umbrella when she goes home to-night; mine's used up," Mrs. Lovell remarked as they glanced out at the dim shapes passing in the distance.

"It's my good umbrella," Celia complained.

"Well, maybe it will hold up by night," Mrs. Lovell said hopefully, yet there was no suggestion outside of holding up.

If the weather was depressing in Celia's pretty cottage, it was somewhat more so in Weldon's tin house back in the pines. He had a fire in his stove, to be sure, but the pipe did not draw very well on windy days, and, by the same token, his tin house was full

of smoke; map-making, therefore, was out of the question. He had intended sending to town for an extra length of stovepipe, so as to get a better draft, but the good weather had caused him to neglect doing so, and now there was nothing to do but stand the discomfort.

He lit his pipe and added tobacco smoke to the general murkiness of the apartment. He had on his overcoat, but thought of adding unto himself his tarpaulin. Fortunately, his wood was dry, and, if only the rain would hold up he could make a fire outside and manage fairly well. It was merely a question, then, of sitting out the rain. Unfortunately, though, the wind was from the northeast, and he knew that the end was not in sight.

Weldon had good staying powers, and could maintain his equanimity under considerable discomfort. Discomfort, indeed, is the price that must often be paid for life in the open—that and solitude. He was not hilarious as he sat by his smoking stove. It was one of those rare occasions when he fell to reviewing his life—what he had got out of it, and what he had missed.

Now Weldon had got a good many things, first and last; he had had respect and liking, and good-fellowship, even some affection, all wedged in with work that he was peculiarly fitted for, and a method of living that suited his fancy. These are big things, but there is nothing tangible about them, and they can disappear from even the mind's eye on a gray day in the pines, with a northeaster bring-

ing in the sleety rain, and the cold creeping to the marrow. To Weldon's depressed spirits the tin house and the smoking stove seemed the sum of his gains from a life of toil and self-denial. He knew there was something wrong with the way he looked at things, and he tried to stop thinking at all, but he caught himself sitting with his eyes on the stove, whenever he opened them for a while. He watched the smoke creep through the cracks in the lid, and he knew his subconscious mind was set upon the meagreness of his existence.

Suddenly it occurred to him that the key to the whole situation was woman.

"It would be better to have married almost anybody," he thought, yet he knew there was fallacy in his conclusion. There had been one woman, of course, there always is, or has been, when a man "comes to forty year," but she had not seen Weldon in a romantic light, and, as the lieutenant would have put it, that was all there was to it. That was all for Weldon, anyway. His life was not ruined, and his nature was not warped, but he had never cared for any one else. It was all far in the background, and he did not think of it, unless circumstances depressed him and stopped his work. Seldom did his tin house and his stove show so seamy a side; even his pipe had lost its soothing influence. Three days for a northeaster, two, and a little over, strictly speaking. He would hold—he could stick it out.

It did not occur to him that help might come from

without until he heard an enlivening sound just outside; it was Wrexham's voice.

"I say there! Are you within?" Wrexham called, and he beat on the tin house as he did so.

Weldon opened the door with alacrity. He was scarcely prepared for the appearance of the lieutenant. To use the young man's own adjective, he was distinctly smart; all the lines and details about him were correct, and, though they were usually so, the effect, in the present setting, was striking. It was cheerful, too; the very sight of such patent defiance of mournful nature gave Weldon a pleasurable sensation.

"Are you going to sit in this little kennel all day?" Wrexham inquired.

"It's better than sitting outside," said Weldon. "Come in. The stove has—er——"

"My word," the lieutenant exclaimed on the threshold. "Are you doing yourself over into smoked herrings? Gad, it isn't even warm in here."

"No," said Weldon, "you see the stove——"

"I should put it out, and set fire to the whole darned business, so as to get warm for once in the day, if it were mine," said the lieutenant.

"No good, it's tin," said Weldon.

"Most unfortunate. At any rate we'll get away from it; I've come to take you up to get the tea and cake. There's a fire, too, a good one. I saw the smoke curling up out of the chimney as I came by on the road," the young man declared.

The suggestion fell pleasantly upon Weldon's

consciousness. He was about to agree when he remembered his appearance. "I'd have to dress," he said doubtfully. He had made the contemplated addition of the tarpaulin to his costume.

"I think I should undress first," said the lieutenant, as he looked at him.

"Oh, I won't go," Weldon announced decidedly.

"Come now, you're getting sore," his friend declared. "Remember, you'll get something to eat, and you'll be warm while you eat it."

This argument had an evident effect. Weldon opened his modest trunk and took stock of his shirts.

"I'll stroll down the road a bit, while you change," the lieutenant said.

"Better stay under cover," Weldon advised.

"If you'll excuse me, I don't care for the soot on my clothes," the other answered. "Besides, I'm rather used to rain, you know. I shall fancy I'm ambling down Piccadilly, for a throw-off after this hole."

He went off and Weldon devoted himself to his toilet. It was difficult to find his things; he had to light the lamp before he was through, for the shadows under the pines were very dense on that stormy winter afternoon.

He had not finished when Wrexham returned, so, in spite of the soot, the young man came in and waited. He was rather surprised at Weldon's appearance.

"You look very decent," he said approvingly.

Weldon tried to get the effect in the four-by-six

mirror that hung upon the wall, but without much success, so he took the lieutenant's word for it, and they started out.

Because of their umbrellas they had to go single file down the narrow path that cut through the woods, and there was not much opportunity for conversation. It was not until they came out on the car-track that they walked abreast. Then Weldon remembered a detail that had been overlooked.

"What's the lady's name?" he asked.

"Northrup," said the lieutenant, "Miss Northrup; very charming woman."

Weldon stopped with an exclamation.

"What's her first name?"

"I didn't ask her," the lieutenant replied.

Weldon said no more; somehow he knew it was Celia Northrup.

"If she's the one I'm thinking of, you won't have to introduce me," he mentioned as they went up the steps.

He was prepared; Celia was not. She found it very surprising that John Weldon should be the tin man.

"Why haven't you been to see me before?" she demanded.

"I didn't know it was you," he said, and his emphasis struck her pleasantly.

They had so much to say in explaining the circumstances that had brought them to this meeting, that Wrexham found himself reduced to the society of Mrs. Lovell. At any rate, he got the most he

could out of it. He sat astride the chair before her, with his arms folded on the back, much in the fashion in which young actors are often photographed, and he looked quite as debonair as any of them.

"Are you going to put that on a pocket-handkerchief for a soldier?" he inquired.

"No, I'm not," said Mrs. Lovell. "This is not the sort of thing that soldiers need, as I should think you'd understand very well, if you've been one yourself."

"Oh, I didn't know—in America. You're showering so many attentions on your men, I shouldn't think you'd draw the line at a bit of lace. Why do you do it when you might buy it for tuppence a yard?" he asked.

"Not this," said Mrs. Lovell, with the tightening of her lips, which always meant with her quiet, yet unalterable antagonism. She pursued the course of her crochet-needle without raising her eyes from her work, and the lieutenant started again.

"I used to know a little chorus girl at the Alhambra, who was keen on that sort of bunk," he said. "Used to sit by, and do it in the wings. It looked a trifle odd, you know, in her tights. She was in rather a racy ballet that season."

Mrs. Lovell was interested in spite of herself. "You say it was this same sort of thing she was doing?"

"Yes, tatting, or rickrack, or something of the kind."

"This is Irish filet-work," Mrs. Lovell explained.

"Well, she did it with a thread and a hook like yours," the lieutenant answered. "And one night, the poor girl went on for her scene in a hurry, with the bally thing caught on to her legs, and pulling out all over the stage."

Mrs. Lovell lowered her eyelids, and said nothing. She could countenance the doing of filet-work by a chorus girl, but the bold possession of legs was another matter.

Celia, looking over toward them, saw that all was not going well. Wrexham, however, was pursuing his reminiscences to a lively conclusion. There was not a sign upon his face by which it might be seen that he was aware of the effect he was producing, but he kept surreptitious watch upon Mrs. Lovell's expression, nevertheless. Celia saw it, too, and interrupted his monologue.

"So you have actually shipped with Mr. Weldon," she said.

"Yes, I play Friday to his Crusoe," he replied. "You should see him, sitting in his little hut, with the rain coming down all around him, and the smoke pouring out of the stove inside. It's rather an odd stove, he's got, you know, as cold as a rock, and yet it spouts smoke like a whale."

"That must make it dreadfully uncomfortable," said Celia sympathetically.

"Oh, I manage," said Weldon. "I've got to get another length of pipe."

Celia smiled; the speech was so typical of the man.

He wondered what had amused her—probably the picture that Wrexham had drawn of his plight.

The lieutenant continued his description. "He looked like Pluto coming out of Hades when he let me in this afternoon," he went on, "or like some of that mythological bunk—soot all over him, and his house puffing at every crack."

"This weather won't keep up long," said Weldon.

"It was the thought of getting warm that fetched him here this afternoon," the lieutenant declared.

Weldon said nothing; he was thinking what a calamity it would have been if he had not come. He knew it was not necessary to assure Celia of his pleasure in being there.

She glanced at him, smiling, but her vision was none the less keen. She had not seen John Weldon in five years, and she was not at all certain what might be taken for granted concerning him. He turned his gray eyes from the fire and met her glance—met it squarely, so that, without knowing that he did so, he told her everything that she wanted to know.

Celia looked well that afternoon, although, as Weldon had said, she was not usually thought pretty. She had a daintily shaped head, a humorous light in her eyes, and a harmony of feature that was pleasing. Weldon had always found her appearance entirely satisfactory, but upon this occasion it seemed more to his taste than ever. Perhaps it was

because she had done her dark hair in a new and becoming fashion, and because she wore a dress of some soft, gold-colored stuff, which set off her coloring very well. Weldon was unaware of these details, but he found the whole effect agreeable.

"You haven't admired my house," she complained.

"It's got a fireplace big enough for a castle," the lieutenant remarked.

"Yes, it's almost all of it fireplace; that's why I bought it."

"You always said you were coming back here to live," Weldon said, looking at her with remembrance of the love she had had for her early surroundings.

"I used to think I should be perfectly happy if I could get back," she answered.

He looked at her questioningly as the lieutenant gave his attention to the fire which had fallen apart. "Has it been a successful experiment?" he asked.

"Perfectly," said Celia. "That is, I'd rather live here than anywhere in the world. For the rest, I guess we learn to make compromises as we grow older."

"You haven't grown any older," said Weldon bluntly. There was in his eyes the same half-dumb expression of devotion that she had found very pleasant in days gone by.

She was unable to tell Weldon that he, too, had not grown older since last they had met. He had grown decidedly older. He had never had much of the dash and sparkle of youth; there had always

been so much stamina about him that he lost something in gayety in his earlier years. Now, however, his fibre had strengthened even more. There was the quiet, determined, rather unexpectant look of a man who has settled for the long pull. To Celia there was something a little sad about it, yet something restful, and pleasant too. She had always liked John Weldon, and had felt sorry that he had not been contented with her liking—sorry for his sake—but his devotion, since he had elected to offer it, had been acceptable to her, even though he had not been a captivating lover. He had gone off at last on an engineering expedition in South America. Celia herself had said that she thought it was a good thing for him, and so the episode had ended.

It was like opening an old novel to see him again. He looked well, yet older, more forceful even, and more expansive. He seemed to have lost his former restraint, that trait which often comes from the self-distrustfulness of youth, and which Weldon had held on to longer than he was justified in doing. Altogether, it was evident now that he had found himself; he had come to a perception of values, his own included. It was that which made him seem older, more assured, yet less hopeful.

The lieutenant turned and saw Weldon's expression. He remembered what his employer had said about the only woman—who wasn't pretty. "Gad," he said to himself, "she comes uncommonly near it!"

Wrexham was a deck-hand of some discrimination. He had also an experienced eye with regard

to women, and Celia might have felt herself flattered by his approval. He was not surprised at the discovery of Weldon's sentiment toward their hostess, for things of that sort never surprised him; he accepted them as matters of course.

"Is the cake satisfactory?" asked Celia.

"It's the first I've had in two months," said Weldon, and indicated that he could dispose of another piece.

The lieutenant also held out his plate. "I'm not fed up with it myself," he said.

It was a pleasant moment; the dark afternoon had turned to a darker night, and the crackle of the logs on the hearth sounded particularly cheerful against the patter of the rain on the roof and the moans and creaks of the oaks that hung over Celia's house.

CHAPTER VIII

THE next day was Sunday, and Weldon went to town in spite of the rain. Celia saw him pass her house on his way to the station, and she was glad he was not spending another day with his smoking stove. He looked for some sign of her as he went by, but saw none. It made the world seem like a different place, though, just to know that she was within hail once more, and he carried a cheerful countenance under his dripping umbrella.

Wrexham went back into the woods later in the day, but found the tin house deserted. His walk was not without reward, however, for, turning into the back road, he suddenly came upon Molly Hunter with a collection of young Hunters and Pentons, all on their way to Sunday-school. They were cloaked, umbrellaed, and overshoed effectively enough, yet with such discrepancies and mismatchings as needs must be evidenced when families go abroad in the rain.

Molly recognized the lieutenant with annoyance, for one of her overshoes came off every few steps, but he appeared overjoyed at the meeting.

"To Sunday-school!" he exclaimed. "I don't know that I ever went to one of those."

"He never went to Sunday-school," Robert announced to the others in the rear.

"I don't think they have it in the Church of England," he said.

"Oh, they must have it," Molly exclaimed.

"Possibly you are right. I never went to one, anyway. Baptists and Methodists and dissenters have them, though, even in England."

"Baptists and Methodists are dissenters," Molly affirmed.

"Oh, no, something quite different. I've heard of them all my life—Baptists and Methodists and dissenters. Dissenters, you know, are rather a low sort."

"Well, they're not a low sort here, whatever they may be in England," said Molly, with some spirit. "I'm a dissenter myself, I'm a Presbyterian."

"Oh, that's all right, Church of Scotland," the lieutenant answered condescendingly.

"They are all dissenters from the Church of England," Molly agreed.

"Oh, no. Dissenters are quite different from the others," he asserted with calm decision.

Molly hated to be contradicted without reason. "Why are they different? What do they believe?" she demanded.

"My word, I'm not one of them, I can't tell you that," he replied. "But I know all about them—I've heard all my life of Baptists and Methodists and dissenters."

"Well, I'm one—I'm a dissenter," Molly proclaimed heatedly.

"Oh, no. Church of Scotland is all right," he assured her.

"I don't care whether it's the Church of Scotland

or not," she answered. "If you went to church more frequently, possibly you wouldn't make such mistakes about religions."

"I go very often in England," he told her. "When the King goes, the Guards have to go too, and when one is on duty one is obliged to go to church. Of course, I hate it, but I've sense enough to be reverent when I get there, for if there's one thing sensible about me it is that I have respect for the Lord Almighty—a fellow's a fool not to have, you know."

He spoke with a note of real sincerity that surprised Molly. Somehow, it widened her understanding of religion. She knew the lieutenant was not religious, he was not even good; he was actively worldly, and yet he had said that odd thing. It lifted her above doctrines and denominations for a moment.

Wrexham did not know he was preaching a sermon as he walked by Molly's side along the muddy road; he did see, though, that for some reason her antagonism toward him over the church question had abated. He saw he had scored without intending it, for her expression was distinctly more sympathetic. The children had dropped behind, so that he and Molly were alone, and a very pleasant sense of companionship was growing between them, wayfarers, as they were, in the rain.

"I say, do you affect most people as you do me?" the lieutenant asked suddenly.

"I don't know," said Molly. "How do I—" she was interrupted by a shout from behind.

"Molly, you've dropped your overshoe!"

Now Molly knew very well that she had dropped it—one can hardly cast a shoe unawares—but she had decided not to notice the matter, and to trust to luck to get her property again when she returned. She had calculated without the rear-guard. Robert came running up with the overshoe, and, though the lieutenant offered his services, she seized it and put it on, steadying herself by Robert's sturdy little shoulder. The trouble was it was sure to drop off again. Clearly, she must get rid of the lieutenant.

"There's no use in your coming out of your way with us in all this weather," she said.

"But this is very much in my way," he replied decidedly. "I rather thought I should take a squint at the Sunday-school myself."

"Oh, no, you mustn't," said Molly quickly.

"Eh, but I should fancy you'd think it good for me, as you've a way of saying."

"I don't want you to go," she said flatly, and the statement had nothing to do with overshoes.

"My word, but I'm rather keen on going, if that's so," he declared.

"Then I shan't go," said Molly. She felt that the lieutenant would be too discordant a note in the little meeting-house where the country children assembled. She stopped in the road, but the children caught up with them, so she went on again until they should have argued the matter out. He could see that she was in earnest, very much so, and he was shrewd enough to be flattered by her attitude.

"Should I contaminate the school?" he asked.

"You'd be critical and cynical about all that we are trying to do," said Molly, "and I shouldn't enjoy the service if you were there."

"My aunt, I must have a pleasing personality," he exclaimed.

She made no comment upon his personality; it was too pleasing, that was the trouble. They walked along for a few steps in silence, and then she realized that her overshoe was working off again.

"Won't you go back," she begged. Her motives were certainly mixed.

"Yes, when we get there," he agreed.

"No, now," said Molly.

Her insistence shook his confidence in there being some subtle reason for the request. He bowed as elegantly as he could, encumbered as he was with the umbrella. "Good afternoon, Miss Hunter," he said, and turned abruptly, amid a chorus from behind.

"Ain't you goin' to Sunday-school?"

"No, many thanks," he answered curtly and retired.

He was not out of ear-shot when Robert called in great merriment: "Molly's lost her overshoe again!"

"Be still," said Molly, quite low, and she threw a glance behind her.

The lieutenant, too, was looking back. He turned away at once and pursued his course, but Molly saw that he was smiling, or thought she saw it, which

amounted to the same thing as far as she was concerned.

"Why couldn't I have had the sense to make a joke of it?" she demanded of herself in exasperation. After all, the whole trouble was made by being poor. "I hate it," thought Molly resentfully for the first time in all her life.

She had accepted conditions as a matter of course before, but this afternoon she had been humiliated by a pair of overshoes that had made her appear absurd in the eyes of a well-dressed, dashing young man who admired her. At least she thought he would have admired her, but that she appeared to be so poverty-stricken. He would always remember her diving for that overshoe. The matter assumed undue proportions in her mind, and she knew that it had. "But it's hard, just the same," she said to herself. It was impossible for her to take a cheerful view of life just then—of her life, anyway.

"What's the matter, Molly?" asked one of the half-grown Hunters, for Molly had become exceedingly quiet.

Robert, at her side, called out his explanation:

"Molly's mad,
And I am glad,
And I know what will please her—
Bottle of wine
To make her shine
And Mister Wrexham to squeeze her."

Molly knew that poem, and she could predict the end from the beginning.

"Hush! Be still, Robert! You're getting very pert," she exclaimed. But there was no way of heading off Robert when once he had started upon a rhyme.

Fortunately, Mr. Wrexham was no longer even in sight. "I shan't let you go home with me," she declared. Robert, however, was outgrowing some of his little-boy habits, he said he didn't care, and so the walk to Sunday-school ended not so pleasantly as it had begun.

It was past the hour for the opening of the school, but everybody was waiting for Molly, who, with the contingent that she marshalled, was a little late. Molly played the organ. It was commonly called an organ, but of course it was only a melodeon, and it puffed and wheezed after the manner of its kind. But Molly knew how to keep it going; she could get the good old hymn-tunes out of it that were to live in the hearts of the country children gathered weekly in that little room.

The house was not ceiled; the walls were decorated with prints of Biblical subjects—prophets, judges, and martyrs, bearded and robed, affecting more liveliness of color than was probably their habit, yet standing out very strikingly before the eyes of youth against the whitewashed boards.

There had been two rooms originally in the house, but the partition between them had been taken out for the better accommodation of the Sunday-school. Now the boys sat on one side of the central chimney, and the girls on the other, while the superintendent

took his stand in one of the narrow passageways next to the wall, and Molly and the melodeon were wedged in across the way.

There was a large attendance for that rainy afternoon. The Shipyard children had driven over in two covered wagons, with curtains flapping in defiance of broken straps. The Pin Point children had come on foot, four legs to each umbrella—odd-looking forms stumbling down the car-track. Old man Jinks, from Burnside, who had scoffed at religion in the pride of his heart for sixty years and more, had walked two miles to bring the apple of his eye, in the person of his small granddaughter, in order that a certain coveted pin for attendance might be secured. The little girl was blond and stolid, pink and round; Jinks was wizened and clay-colored. He had brought her, though, and he had kept her dry. He felt her all over, then he brushed down her little skirts, and put her in the infant class, where she joined with unexpected vigor in the singing:

“Jesus loves me, this I know—”

Old Jinks sat by the fireplace and dried his feet. He faced the infant class there, and the seat was reserved for him every Sunday afternoon. Possibly his pride in the power of lung that he had handed down to posterity may have been the motive which brought him to it so regularly.

There was an odd mixture of classes in the assemblage, gathered here and there, from the better

places along the river front, and the plainer houses scattered along the back roads. Molly liked to hear the singing. She felt the poetic beauty in those unmodulated childish voices, which, with the assistance of the melodeon, of course, filled the bare room and reverberated through the woods. Such a helpless little flock it was, so trustfully singing:

“Saviour, like a shepherd lead us.”

Molly joined in; she loved the dear old hymn. Jimmy was feeling about in his thin upper register for the tenor; one of the Hunter boys was grunting out a bass; Robert sang the air with all his heart, in his sweet soprano. Old Jinks kept time with the foot that was swinging free before the fire, the while his eyes rested upon his granddaughter, who was lifting up her lusty voice in song, directed by the vigorous emphasis of the teacher's bobbing head.

Molly was thankful that Mr. Wrexham was not there. She could see him in fancy, in all the elegance of his attire, sitting beside old Jinks, a keen and ironical observer, in spite of the blank expression upon his face. Oh, yes, Molly was glad she had not let him come to the Sunday-school. She felt better for the hour spent in the little place; somehow, she seemed to get her bearings again as she struggled with the wheezing melodeon, for the atmosphere was so normal, and so wholesome and sweet. She did not care if she was poor, and she could have laughed at the worn overshoe, had the lieutenant been with her on the way home,

The lieutenant, however, was not in sight. The road looked very forsaken. Molly threw a comprehensive glance down its length as she went out of the Sunday-school. She would not have objected had she seen a smart young man approaching from the distance, but there were only one or two figures visible upon it, and these had not Wrexham's modishness of cut. They were negroes going home from "praise," and their loud talk and occasional bursts of laughter, like echoes from another world, had a hollow and remote sound, which seemed but to accentuate the loneliness. They were, indeed, from another world—one whose life ran back and forth through those woods and found shelter in the humble homes of the clearings.

The dreariness of the scene got on Molly's nerves. "I'm going to see Miss Northrup," she announced suddenly. She declined Robert's company for the visit and, turning off at the big sweet-gum tree, cut over toward the railroad.

The rain had stopped and the clouds were breaking in the west; there was even a sort of yellow light that told of a possible sun from which a gleam might come at its setting.

Celia was in her garden trying to get a little exercise on the sodden paths. She had on a tawny coat that enveloped her slight figure, and Molly looked at her with the despairing admiration that youth sometimes gives to graceful, affluent maturity.

"I'm so glad to see somebody moving on the road," said Celia, coming to meet Molly at the gate.

"Somebody besides negroes with crocus sacks wrapped around them," Molly agreed. Then, by common consent, they went down to the plank walk that led across the marshes to the little wharf where Celia's boat was anchored. The dreary sky shut them in, and the narrow footing drew them close together.

"Two on a Tower,'" Celia quoted as she looked at the gray river before them, and the broad, brown marsh that separated them from the shore.

"I shouldn't mind risking that, with you," Molly said impulsively.

Celia was pleased at the girl's liking.

"It's odd," Molly went on, suddenly putting into words the thought which had been half defined in her mind for some time, "you have made me feel the reality of a life so different from this that I've known always. This is only existing; I didn't realize it until you came." The tranquillity that Molly had attained a half-hour ago had left her.

"Then it's too bad I came," Celia commented pointedly. She looked at the girl with a keen glance, and she saw discontent in her face. "What attracts you so much in the life you think I represent?" she asked.

"Oh, it's so much gayer and fuller than this," said Molly, with a sweep of her hand toward the marsh.

Celia turned her eyes shoreward to where the smoke of her chimney curled upward between the oaks. A dog barked somewhere back in the woods;

all distant sounds emphasize the loneliness on a gray afternoon.

"It is gayer," she admitted, "but I have come back to this with pleasure."

"Yes, because you have had the other," Molly cried. "It gives something that I haven't got, I can see that. I feel at such a disadvantage without it."

"At a disadvantage with whom?" Celia asked.

Molly hesitated for a moment, then she saw that there was only one answer under the present conditions. "Well, with Mr. Wrexham, just now, but there'd always be somebody."

"That's nonsense," said Celia. "Mr. Wrexham likes you because you are different from the women he has known."

"They are mostly actresses, and I'd be different from those anyway," said Molly. She was flattered, though, by the assurance with which Celia spoke of the lieutenant's approval of herself, for she knew that he had probably expressed himself freely on the subject, as was his custom.

"I don't know that it's necessary to be so very different," said Celia. "Some actresses are ladies, and very charming women, too."

"Yes, and they have such beautiful clothes," Molly said enviously.

"Oh, that's it," Celia exclaimed with a smile. "It's not that your wits are not a match for the lieutenant's."

"It's silly of me," said Molly, "but he sets such tremendous weight on clothes."

"Educate him out of that—you can," Celia answered with meaning.

Molly shook her head, yet she was pleased at the suggestion of her influence with the lieutenant. "I might do it if I had money, not without it. People always put ugly old clothes down to necessity, not preference, and they are not far wrong."

"What do clothes matter?" Celia exclaimed. "Nobody's thinking about them now in war-times. Money is just a matter of luck, though," she said reflectively. "Mr. Wrexham would be better off if less of it had come his way."

"Very much better off," Molly agreed, "but not so fascinating." The word slipped out, she had not intended to use it; she had not, indeed, even used it in her thoughts.

Celia noticed it with some misgiving. "He is rather fascinating," she agreed.

"Oh, just on the surface," Molly hastened to add. "He's so different."

"Do you think him good-looking?" Celia asked.

"Oh, yes."

"His mouth is too small," Celia remarked with decision.

"Yes, but his teeth are so good, and his smile is so fetching," Molly answered quickly.

Celia looked at her, and they both laughed.

"Don't you think he's good-looking?" Molly asked in return.

"Yes, of course, but I'm a dispassionate onlooker."

"Well, I am, too," Molly declared.

"No, you aren't," said Celia, and she ran her arm through Molly's and turned her half-way about. "You might just as well face it, Molly, that young man is dangerous, and the worst of it is he hasn't much principle."

"I know it," said Molly. "He'd make a fool of me in a minute if he could."

"Has he told you about Edie Ingot?" Celia asked.

"Edie Ingot? No. Who is she?"

"She's the actress he's going to marry when he gets back to London."

"Oh," said Molly, and then added on impulse: "He told me he wasn't a marrying man."

"Audacious youth," said Celia.

"I thought it rather an unnecessary confidence," Molly remarked.

"No, it wasn't so unnecessary," said Celia. "It's his idea of playing fair."

"I don't want to marry him," Molly declared.

"Probably not; but you are better off for having all the information in the case," Celia assured her. "You see, Edie makes eighty pounds a week."

"Oh," said Molly again, with a shade of sarcasm in her voice. After a moment she asked: "Is she pretty?"

"Beautiful," said Celia. "He showed me her picture."

"And you think he will marry her?"

"He says he will—if she wants him to."

"What a remarkable way to put it!" Molly exclaimed.

"That's the way he puts it," said Celia. "His world is too different from yours, Molly," she added.

"That's what I meant in the beginning," said Molly.

"Well, you wouldn't want to have those standards, would you?"

"No, but I'd understand them better if I didn't have to evolve all my ideas of his world out of my own head."

"Oh, no, not quite that," said Celia. "You must admit he gives rather a graphic account of it himself. He's a liberal education in smart life, if you take him in the right way."

"What is the right way?" Molly asked.

"Not the sentimental one," said Celia.

"Oh," said Molly, and she said it rather colorlessly, so that Celia could not tell just what her state of mind might be. Molly herself was not sure of her state of mind. She was silent for a while, looking out at the darkening water, yet she told more by her silence than by her speech.

There was no doubt that the lieutenant had had an effect upon Molly, and not merely an educational one, Celia thought. "Take him for what he's worth," she advised sagely.

Molly turned to her in surprise. "I thought you liked him."

"I do. I even find him fascinating, as you say, but that's a different matter."

"I don't see why," said Molly, with determined obtuseness.

"There's a difference of ten years, at the most charitable calculation," Celia answered, smiling.

"He says you are charming," Molly told her.

"He ought to think so; I'd call anybody charming who listened to my conversation for three hours on a stretch. But, after all, that's merely a figure of speech; I don't charm him any more than he fascinates me. I'm not the leading lady, Molly."

"Well, I'm not," said Molly.

"I think you might consider yourself the understudy," said Celia critically.

"For Edie Ingot?" Molly inquired, and there was absolute disdain in her tone.

Celia laughed. "That's a thing it won't hurt you to keep in mind, in your acquaintance with Mr. Wrexham," she said. Yet she could not help reflecting that understudies could themselves be dangerous to the pretensions of the star. At any rate, she had put Molly in possession of the facts, and she felt better satisfied.

It was pleasant on the wharf after the long confinement of two days of rain, and they stayed out quite late. The night car came in just as they got back to the shore, and a man swung off from it and joined them. It was Weldon, with the extra length of stovepipe in his hand. Celia thought the fact characteristic of him.

"I thought I recognized you," he said with satisfaction.

Celia presented him to Molly, who was at a loss to account for him, but awaited developments.

"How did you get the pipe on Sunday?" Celia inquired.

"Oh, I managed," he answered. He was a man who always managed; that was one nice thing about him, she remembered.

"Rather an awkward piece of merchandise to carry by hand, isn't it?" she asked.

"It's not exactly elegant," he said, looking down at the pipe, "but I needed it."

"Mr. Weldon is the 'tin man,'" Celia explained to Molly.

"Oh, yes," said Molly. "Only I've been calling him the oysterman," she added.

"I'm both," said Weldon.

Peering through the gloom, he decided that this must be the girl Wrexham had been moved to admire. He remembered the words: "Got a nice skin." "Very probably she has," he thought.

Celia said she was going to take Molly home, so Weldon secreted his stovepipe under a myrtle bush and accompanied them.

It was not very far to Molly's house; Weldon and Celia lingered a little coming back. The clouds were rolling up before a drying wind, and here and there a star gleamed through a clear spot.

"Nice night," he commented.

"Yes," she agreed.

They seemed very much in accord in the darkness and the wind. Even under other conditions conversation had never been very necessary between them. She had always found that one of the pleasing features of his society.

"I often know what you are thinking about," he said, when she spoke of it. "Or, rather, I used to. You see, I gave the subject some study."

"More than it deserved," said Celia.

"It interested me," said Weldon, and he put out his hand to steady her over a broken bit of the path. Celia's shaggy coat was soft beneath his touch. "That's a nice, warm coat you've got on," he said. His voice had a caressing note in it that seemed to epitomize the years of his devotion to her. It gave Celia a sense of stability, which the strength of his arm upheld. Her habit used to be to wish that John Weldon were as exciting as he was nice, but she forgot his lacks just now. Certainly he was very nice. He had been wrong in thinking she had not grown older; excitement was no longer her first demand in social intercourse. Seen under these conditions, however, he fitted well into his surroundings, a fact which she felt should be remembered in recognizing his greater power to please her.

Weldon stepped from the path and secured his stovepipe. Celia would have forgotten it, even had it been her own; Weldon remembered, though Celia's nearness absorbed his thought.

She asked him in to supper, but he declined—merely because he thought he had better do so. Probably he was right, for Celia decided later that she was glad he had not come; she had a good book, and Mrs. Lovell's somnolence was soothingly companionable. She thought about him with pleasure, though, when she opened her window for the night.

It was rather romantic to remember that he was over there in the darkness of the pines. If he was awake, she fancied he was thinking of her. Probably, though, he was not awake, for there could be little in the tin house to induce him to sit up.

She laughed at the girlishness of her reflections, a little, too, at the thought that John Weldon could stir her to romanticism. It could not even be attributed to an ivied casement, and the "great Orion sloping slowly toward the west," for the window was very modern, and the clouds were still blowing across the sky. A little noise below caught her attention—Orion, the cat, had called to her softly from his field. Another friend out in the night!

"If I hadn't named you already, I'd call you John Weldon," said Celia. "You are both of you loyal, and self-reliant and uncomplaining," she finished, rather pleased at her cleverness in noting the resemblance. Weldon, however, would not have been complimented. He was not fond of cats.

CHAPTER IX

THE more Wrexham thought of Molly's having dismissed him on the road to Sunday-school, the less he liked it. He had heard Robert's shout about the overshoe, but, after some consideration he had given up the idea that Molly might have been embarrassed on that account.

"If she doesn't mind the old darned sweater, why should she be so touchy about the gutta-percha boots?" he inquired of himself with some amusement. "I should be rather hacked if my boots were to slip off at every other step, but she has no particular standard to keep up. I think she could say something quite clever about it if she tried," he reflected.

No, Molly's conduct could scarcely be explained by the gutta-percha boots. He had thought at first that she felt his influence would be too disturbing to her thoughts in the Sunday-school, and he had been rather flattered by the idea, but there had been a very determined ring in Molly's voice which could scarcely be accounted for in a manner so pleasing to his vanity. He did not recall ever having encountered just that air of indifference to his personality before, and it annoyed him; he felt impelled to bring Molly to a realization of his charms. Yet she was scarcely worth his while—"an obscure little country miss," he decided with scorn. "She

had an uncommonly nice color, though," he reflected, as he recalled her appearance upon the road.

He did not see her for several days. This, however, was scarcely his fault. Edie Ingot had come into Molly's consciousness very forcefully, and she kept well out of his way. He planned to be exceedingly distant to her, but he could not find her to be distant to. Of course, he might have called upon her again, but it is awkward to call in order to be distant. It seemed remarkably odd that he was not able to meet her. He had to run about in the "puff boat" with Weldon all day, but he kept a sharp lookout for Molly when he was ashore. All to no purpose, however, for Molly was not to be seen, and it was surprising how the landscape lost in interest because of her absence.

"It's a beastly hole of a place," he said to his landlady, whom he never attempted to deceive as to the state of his temper or his spirits. "There's not even shooting," he exclaimed in disgust.

"You can shoot if you want to," Mrs. Penton said placidly.

"Eh, but you don't understand shooting in this country; you've no coverts," he objected. "Besides, I'm working for my living in the puff boat," he reminded her.

"Do you suppose you're of any use on it?" she asked impartially.

"Oh, I rather think I must be; he's going to pay me, so I think I must be doing something," he answered.

The argument seemed entirely convincing to the lieutenant, and Mrs. Penton said no more, whatever may have been her opinion.

He thought of asking her about Molly, but somehow, it seemed difficult to swing around to the subject, so he repaired to Robert for information.

"Has Miss Hunter gone away?" he asked in a casual tone.

"You mean Miss Hunter or Molly?" Robert inquired.

"I mean Molly," said the lieutenant promptly.

"No, she ain't gone away," said Robert, "she lives here." Then he added nothing of further interest, though the lieutenant gave him several openings.

"She might go into town sometimes, I suppose," he suggested.

"Yes," Robert agreed, but wandered to a more interesting subject. "Me and Jimmy's goin' to town, soon as we can get two dimes and two nickels. We're goin' to a movin' picture, and we're goin' to get soda-water."

Wrexham was not interested in the plans of Robert and Jimmy. It seemed absurd that Molly, this very unimportant person, living just next door to him, in a place where there were not twenty people, should be so very difficult of access.

"It's like getting an audience with a crowned head to have a word with her," he complained to himself irritably. "One would fancy she might be

met about the roads; one meets all the rest of the population."

Suddenly an explanation flashed into the lieutenant's mind—Molly was avoiding him. "My word!" he said aloud, and he sat up with the surprise of the idea.

"What's the matter?" asked Weldon.

They were crossing the sound in the puff boat, and the lieutenant was lounging along the deck.

"I've just got a line, as you call it over here, on an uncommonly difficult problem," he announced.

"I didn't know you ever bothered your head about such things," said Weldon.

"I don't, as a rule—unless it's pretty."

Weldon smiled. "I dare say you've tried your hand at a good many problems of that variety."

"One must do something," said the lieutenant.

Weldon steered in silence for a while. He was thinking of Molly; the lieutenant's problem had induced the thought. Weldon had liked Molly; she seemed to him very fresh and girlish, and he had some doubts in his mind as he reflected upon Wrexham's interest in her. Agreeable as he found the young man, it seemed hard that Molly should be fated to make a "Roman holiday" for him.

"A girl raised in the country, without much experience in that sort of thing, might take a flirtation rather seriously," he suggested at length.

"Yes, one has to look out for that," said the lieutenant. "I told her in the beginning I was not a marrying man."

Weldon turned his eyes from the boat's head and encompassed Wrexham in an astounded gaze. "That was infernally impertinent of you," he remarked.

"It's best; one can never tell," said the young man.

"Did you suppose she wanted to marry you?" Weldon asked in scorn.

"If she knew all about me, she wouldn't."

"She can see on the surface of things that you are just a man of fashion and a trifler."

"Oh, no," said the lieutenant; "a girl like that is always thinking there's more to a fellow than just his clothes—particularly, you know, if his clothes are rather a good cut."

"I should say she had too much sense to think that in your case," Weldon remarked curtly.

"I don't know," said the lieutenant. "She may, after all, be right. You see, this war business makes one rather serious. One can't help thinking a bit now and then, and that has an effect. Besides—well, I've never been altogether satisfied, even in London. Oh, I spent money, and I rolled around at the Savoy, and the theatres, and the dancing clubs, but one can't help finding it a beastly bore in the long run. One gets fed up with it. But there's nothing else, except, of course, now one can get killed in France. Personally, though, I didn't care for that either. I didn't funk the thing, you know, but I didn't throw myself upon German bayonets, and I didn't get in the way of a shell.

He sighed, as though possessed by a weariness that could find no rest. In spite of himself, at the moment of disapproval, Weldon felt drawn to the lieutenant. There *was* something to him besides his looks, and his manner, and his clothes. That was the subtle influence that made his surface charm compellent—the feeling that there were unexpected depths beneath.

The young man himself had only a dim idea that the depths existed. "I've had every amusement the world can give," he said. "Of course, I deserve nothing, but I have the chance, and I might as well make the best of it. Things aren't fair, but I can't help that. Look here," he cried, and he took something from his pocket—a newspaper print.

Weldon recognized the picture. It was one which has excited some comment. "Am I My Brother's Keeper?" the painter has written beneath it. It represents a few derelicts of London asleep on the benches of Trafalgar Square. The lieutenant looked at it attentively; the familiar scene brought the meaning home to him.

"I see those people whenever I go into the Savoy," he said. "I drive by them in my car. Some of the fellows don't look at them; they say, 'It's darned unpleasant,' and they turn the other way, but I look at them—they make me think."

"Your thinking doesn't seem to have resulted in anything," said Weldon.

"Oh, I throw them a shilling once and again. But what's the use? What I think of is that it's

just luck—I might be sitting there, and they might be rolling into the Savoy, for all the merit there is in the matter, you know.” He turned again to the picture, and he looked at it very thoughtfully before he put it away.

Surely Molly might be justified in believing such a man capable of more than a flirtation—if she did believe it.

The lieutenant’s face lost its gravity. “About women, though, I always find it best to make misunderstandings impossible at the start,” he announced.

“Then you don’t want to marry,” said Weldon.

“I should like very much to marry—a lady,” the lieutenant replied. “A fellow doesn’t amount to much unless he marries a lady, but—oh, well, it takes money, you know, that sort of thing.”

“If you found the right sort of woman, it wouldn’t take so much,” said Weldon.

““Bread and cheese and kisses,”” the lieutenant quoted. He toyed with the idea as he puffed his cigarette. “This sort of life is bad for one,” he said at length. “Gives a fellow false ideas—a fellow could go off on a sentimental bat in a place like this.”

“I should trust you not to do it,” said Weldon.

The other smiled. “I should have trusted myself—in London. Miss Northrup is a very charming woman,” he said suddenly, and though he looked straight ahead, he saw Weldon’s start of surprise.

Miss Northrup! The audacity of the youth was appalling. Was it for Celia's benefit that Wrexham had announced himself not a marrying man?

"A bit oldish," said the lieutenant, "but I like a woman who's seen the world," he reiterated with calm assurance.

Weldon could have sent him into the water with pleasure, and an unexpected shove would have put him over, so narrow was the strip of deck upon which he was balanced.

"I rather think Miss Northrup has seen your kind before," Weldon said, in a tone that expressed his disapproval of these light references to Celia.

"Undoubtedly," Wrexham agreed. "She's been fed up on it. What she wants is something quite different. Even the eccentric lead might suit her better." There was a merry look in his eyes as he turned them full upon Weldon. Surely he had something very taking about him.

Weldon laughed. He could not help being a little relieved that Celia was not amusing herself with the lieutenant; he had known her to be rather fond of amusement of that sort. Of course, there remained Molly, who would, as he had said, be apt to take an affair seriously; Weldon was uneasy about Molly. "She probably doesn't know how to look out for herself with a man like Wrexham," he thought. Too bad he could not say something to the lieutenant. Yet what could he say? The young man recognized the limits of casual intercourse; so did Weldon, and he said no more.

Wrexham was of the opinion, however, that Molly knew how to look out for herself very well, surprisingly well, when he remembered she had not been out of the "mud-hole," as he chose to call the pleasant shore where Molly had spent her life. The trouble now was that it was so remarkably hard to find her. His wish to impress her with the haughtiness of his manner, after her summary treatment of himself in the road, was dissipated by his wish to see her again. Finally, he ran into her quite unexpectedly.

It was a moonlight night, and Molly was going home from Celia Northrup's, running along over the accustomed paths, when she saw the lieutenant in front of her. His cigarette was lighted, and he was coming toward her "head on before the wind." Molly's part of the walk was in shadow, so she had the advantage of him. Scarcely knowing why, she stepped aside into a clump of cedar bushes. She wanted to meet him, the tingle of the blood in her veins told her that, and yet she seemed to be carrying out a sort of half-formed plan that she had adopted. She knew it would be better for her not to see him.

A moment more and he would have passed, but he heard a movement. Molly was uncertain whether she made it by accident, or by unreasoning intention. He turned, and stepped into the clump of shrubbery. She slipped out to the path again and ran. She was half-way to her house before he caught her.

"My aunt, but you've a pair of heels on you!" he said as he came abreast of her.

"Is that you?" she asked, looking around.

The lieutenant forgot his dignity. "Why were you hiding in the coppice?" he demanded.

"I didn't know who you might be," said Molly.

"That's rather a joke," he said contemptuously.

"I say, sit here on the bench a moment, I've got something to ask you," he added.

"Come inside; it's cold," said Molly.

"I shan't go inside; I've no desire to converse with all the members of your family at once," he replied.

Molly laughed; he sounded so entirely exasperated. She preferred the bench and the moonlight herself, so she sat down as he suggested.

"Well?" she said.

"Why haven't I seen you all these days?" he demanded.

"I don't know," said Molly. "Did you expect me to call upon you?"

"You've been going out of your way to keep from meeting me," he said accusingly.

"Well, why shouldn't I?"

"There are only two reasons why a woman ever avoids a man," he answered. "One, that she doesn't like him, and one, that she does." He threw away his cigarette as he spoke.

"You seem to know a lot about women," said Molly.

"One learns," he remarked, and she felt the thrill

that the knowledge of his experience always gave her.

"Which was your reason?" he asked, leaning toward her.

The spell of his nearness came upon her, and she trembled, not with feeling, but with excitement—at least, she thought it was not feeling. She lifted her glance. How dark the lieutenant's hair, how infinitely deep his eyes, in the shadow cast by the moon!

"I'm not quite sure which," said Molly, and she said it in a tone that managed to be collected.

He admired her self-possession; he had seen girls lose their wits under similar conditions. Molly looked pretty; better than that, she looked enigmatic. His eyes held hers for just a moment; there was something baffling about her that he liked.

Richard Wrexham was a man of taste; it dominated his intercourse with women. He had no fancy for the easy conquest and the crudities of love-making, yet, as he looked at Molly's softly rounded fairness he was filled with a desire to kiss her—as crude a desire as ever filled the heart of youth. It transmitted itself to Molly's intelligence, or rather, to her instinct. The hard part of it was that she wanted to kiss the lieutenant quite as much as he wanted to kiss her. He divined that she did, and then, almost as quickly, she conveyed the impression that he was mistaken. So much can pass in the challenge of eyes in the moonlight.

Molly rose. The lieutenant was beside her.

"You are running away from me now," he said confidently.

"Do you think I am afraid of you?" she asked.

"It doesn't do to underestimate the enemy," he answered.

"Enemy?" said Molly.

"Well, I lay siege to the citadel, as they say in books," he answered.

"You must have done that rather often," she commented.

"No, believe me. They haven't had to be besieged." His smile gave a touch of delicate irony that relieved the self-satisfaction of his speech.

Molly's sense of humor responded to it. Nevertheless she was fired with the ambition of puncturing the young man's complacency. If only she could be sure of herself. She must not let him come so close to her again. Poor Molly, unarmed, save by her own pride, before the lieutenant's practised powers! Yet pride is no mean weapon, particularly when it is added to youth and beauty.

"It's quite natural you should be a trifle inflated by your success," said Molly.

"My aunt, haven't you got the wrong word? Say, 'elated,'" he implored.

Molly had chosen her word with care. She looked up at the lieutenant and laughed—at him. He gave an exclamation of annoyance. If she had not been pretty! But Molly was pretty, and she looked rather more so than usual in the silver light of the moon.

"You think I'm not serious," he said. His voice deepened, and he leaned toward her again.

"About what?" said Molly. A cool self-possession spoke in her words; she was trying to keep Edie Ingot in mind.

The lieutenant found himself at a loss to define his aim. He hesitated, and Molly gave him the benefit of her true opinion.

"I think you are serious about making every woman you fancy fall in love with you," she said.

He did not deny the charge. "Then you think I fancy you?" he asked.

"Yes," said Molly. "For lack of something more theatrical and dashing."

"A sort of throw-off," he suggested, neither affirming nor denying her statement.

"I pass the time for you," said Molly.

"Very pleasantly," said the lieutenant.

Molly was angry. "You flatter me," she remarked, with an overemphasis that was very youthful.

"No, believe me," the lieutenant assured her.

It was his turn to laugh. He knew when he had gone far enough, though, and his voice lost its note of trifling. "Don't you find this pleasant?" he asked.

Those rich, English tones! Molly knew she found it pleasant, besides, his voice propitiated her. "I don't know why you so often make me angry," she said, and looked at him frankly.

"It's my misfortune," he answered, gazing freely

into her face and approving it. He would have said, "It's my talent," to a woman more sophisticated, for he knew that her exasperation with him increased the fascination that he felt at times he had for her. For himself, he was undeniably interested in Molly; as she had said, he fancied her. It had been some time since any one had taken the lieutenant's fancy—Edie, of course, but Edie was slightly different. "Besides, Edie is not quite a lady," he reflected truly, and, for all her poor clothes and her simple surroundings, he felt a certain fineness of fibre in Molly that he liked. He was a fastidious young man, in spite of his bohemian proclivities.

He took the thought of Molly with him through the moonlit night—Molly, who had just the dash of salt about her that gave piquancy to her simplicity. She attracted him strongly, and the occasional conviction that he could have power over her if he tried, made her irresistible at times. He walked far down the bluff, past Celia's little house, with its yellow panes of light, an outpost on the edge of the woods, past John Weldon's tin box, a splotch of deepened shadow beneath the pines. He smoked a great many unnecessary cigarettes—lighted each, puffed a moment or two, tossed it away. He was nervous and restless; excitement always made him so—since the war, of course. More than flesh and bones are torn and shattered on the French battlefields. His cousin Putney used to say——

"My aunt, Putney!" said the lieutenant. Putney was killed that night at Landrecies. Then, too, the

moon had shone. Wrexham threw back his head and looked up. The sky was clear, with here and there bits of white cloud like shells bursting on high.

"My word!" he said, and in quick revulsion he turned back his thoughts to Molly.

Yet there was a letter from Edie Ingot in his pocket, and he had read it twice during the afternoon. Edie was fairly fond of him, too, for one with her opportunities for diversion.

CHAPTER X

"Now, Lizzie, just how many children has your mother got?" Miss Northrup spoke in a business-like voice.

Lizzie leaned on her broom and reflected. "Jis me an' Bubber Tormmie, an' Alec, an' Sarah, an' 'Poleon, an' Lige," she said, telling them off on her fingers.

"I never heard of Alec," said Celia.

"He's up to New York. He runnin' some kinder elevation job. An' Bubber Tormmie an' 'Poleon is gone to the war—the draf' ketch 'em."

"They have to serve their country," said Celia.

"Yes'm, ma tell 'em so. She raise her chil'ren right, Miss Celia."

"You mentioned only six, Lizzie."

"Yes'm, that's right—six head."

"Why, she has lots more than that," Celia exclaimed.

"You count the little ones?" Lizzie asked doubtfully.

"Of course I count them; they are the ones I'm after. I'm going to give them a Christmas tree."

"Lizzie's face broke into a beaming smile. "Praise the Lord!" she cried in delight.

"It's not for you big ones," Miss Northrup said.

"No, ma'am," Lizzie agreed with emphasis, but

she had hopes, just the same. She began counting once more: "There's Viola an' Shrad'y," she said.

Celia wrote down the names. "How old are they?" she demanded.

"Viola must be in her twelve, an' I think Shrad'y in her 'leven," Lizzie answered uncertainly.

"Are they too big for dolls?" Celia inquired.

Lizzie was not sure. "They big," she said; "they higher'n you."

"Then they must be fourteen and fifteen," Celia decided.

"Yes'm, I guess so," said Lizzie. "'Melia, she twelve, an' Shig, he in his 'leven."

"Aren't there any real little ones?" Celia asked.

"Yes'm, I gettin' to 'em—Jimmieniah, an' Rudolph. They is jis' so." Lizzie indicated their height with her hand.

"Is that all?" Celia inquired.

"No, ma'am, ma got two mo'. I has to study a minute, Miss Celia," Lizzie said. "I never does bees home with all them chil'ren much. One is name Isaiah, an' the littles' one name Lily."

"That's all, then," said Miss Northrup, as she entered Lily for a doll.

"Yes'm, that's all, scusin' the baby. She usen to be name Jerseybelle, but ma say she don' like that name; she goin' give 'em name Celia, after you."

"You don't say so," Miss Northrup exclaimed. "That would be better than Jezebel, though. I'll have to give her a dress with lace on it to get chris-

tened in," she promised. That settled it—Jezebel was no more.

Celia had made quite a good start on her list. "Now how about Matilda's children?" she asked.

"My master," said Lizzie. "Ma's chil'ren is scatterin' to Aunt Matildy."

That was true, and it took some time to approximate the necessary statistics with regard to Matilda's family. When they were secured it was seen that the enterprise would assume rather startling proportions. Celia hated to give it up, though; a ten-cent store imparts a sense of security at such times. She went to town and made extensive purchases. Molly was of great help in getting matters straightened out.

"Frances Dilworth is not a boy," she said. Celia had attached the name to a pop-gun.

"Sarah Blake is as old as I am," Molly said again. There was a doll's tea-set put down for Sarah.

Invitations to the tree were sent by word of mouth. Celia was careful to stick to her list, yet she felt uneasy as to the attendance. Lizzie could read, if she had time to consider the text properly, so the list was turned over to her, and she promised to see that the children whose names were on it should be secured admission.

"I'll git 'em in; it ain't nobody goin' to trample 'em down. If they name is on this lis' I'll git 'em through the crowd," she guaranteed.

Celia's heart sank. "Do you think there's going to be such a crowd, Lizzie?" she asked.

"Oh, yes'm. Seein' you havin' it in the chu'ch, an' some o' the people roun' here is never see no Chris'mas tree. Yes'm, that chu'ch is goin' to be thick. Good it ain't July, cause them peoples would pack in there till you'd fair git the fever with the heatness."

"Well, don't ask anybody but those whose names I gave you," Celia ordered.

Lizzie laughed. "You don' know all these colored people, how wulgarsome they kin be, Miss Celia. I done tell 'em you ain't invite 'em, but they say they comin'."

Celia was in despair.

"I told you not to undertake it," Mrs. Lovell said from across the fireplace.

John Weldon offered to provide oranges all around.

"But there's no telling how many you'll have to get," said Celia.

"I'll estimate it," he promised, with that air of decision and assurance that Celia liked.

"You're the nicest person to rely on," she said.

"Why don't you do it oftener, then?" he asked.

"Do what? Rely on you? I do," said Celia.

Mrs. Lovell had gone out of the room, and they were alone by the fire. The red coals dropped softly into the ashes. It was the twilight hour, when old acquaintance is so potent.

Celia looked up at Weldon with appreciation of the qualities that made him so reliable. "I've always relied on you, John," she said.

He laughed a little sadly. "For what?" he asked.

"For your friendship and your sympathy, of course."

He made no comment upon that, but somehow she felt that his silence affirmed the confidence. It seemed, indeed, to offer her more than she had claimed.

Weldon was wondering if it would be worth while to tell her what he had told her twice before. He was not much of a talker; probably he'd do as well by keeping quiet. "It would only make her uncomfortable," he decided. Then, unexpectedly to himself, because Celia's hand was so close to him on the arm of her chair, he took it in his firm, steady clasp. "Is that all you want from me?" he asked.

"What?" said Celia, not because she failed to understand him, but because she rather liked John Weldon to hold her hand. There was such a feeling of strength in his clasp.

"Friendship," said Weldon.

Celia sighed, and drew her hand away. She felt a little irritated with him that she could not have left it there without his fancying she meant some sort of encouragement.

Weldon was punctilious in such matters. Celia liked him all the better for being so, yet now, in the gentle gloaming hour, it was hard to be called upon to discriminate between emotions. Friendship seemed rather an uninspiring term, yet, of course, it was not love she felt for him; no matter what he felt for her, she could not imagine herself in love with John Weldon.

He released her hand at once, and his eyes held a look of quiet acceptance of conditions.

She was a little touched by his manner. "I don't think I'm capable of being in love, John," she said.

"You were once," said Weldon, whose memory, where Celia was concerned, was remarkably clear.

"I thought I was," she admitted. "It all seems so slight, now that I'm older, that I hardly like to call it by that name."

"I used to be afraid you'd marry, and then discover it wasn't the real thing," Weldon told her.

"Fortunately, I didn't put it to that test," she said.

"Yes, fortunately," he echoed.

They were silent for a time, and the logs fell apart. Celia took the tongs and fixed the fire, then she pulled her low chair closer to the hearth. Weldon found the play of light upon her face and the soft folds of her dress very satisfying; there was a sensibility about Celia's expression that he admired.

"As for 'being in love,' I've never liked the phrase," he said slowly. "It's infatuation, not love, that most people feel."

"What's the difference?" asked Celia.

Her face was resting in her locked hands, and she gazed straight before her into the fire. She looked a little wistful, Weldon thought, though perhaps it was just his fancy that made her seem so. Celia was not entirely pleased with herself; she knew she ought not to be drawing on John Weldon to talk about love—it was not quite fair to him.

Weldon felt it rather a relief to talk; he was not critical of her motive. "The difference," he said, "is just the difference between what you felt once for somebody else, and what I've always felt for you."

"How can you tell?" she demanded. That was a thing she had always wanted to know.

"I think it's a matter of endurance," he said slowly, "that, and something else."

"It's the something else, I guess, that makes it endure," Celia said, and she turned to him with sincere admiration of his capacity for a devotion that was not self-seeking.

"You see," said Weldon, who somehow found it easy at that sympathetic moment to tell her the things he had not put into words for so long, "when I could say I'd be glad to see you happy, even with another man, I knew mine was the regular thing."

"And because I know I could never get to that point, I'm sure I'm not capable of real feeling," Celia answered quickly.

"You needn't bother about that test with me," he said.

She laughed softly; John Weldon had his points. He would be a very good, solid man to have sitting in the chimney corner on a winter's night. Nonsense! He was a man to be depended upon in a world of strife. Celia realized that she was growing sentimental, and she shook off the mood with a decided effort. The idea of depending upon any man was foreign to her fancy, for she was a self-reliant woman,

in spite of the dainty femininity that distinguished her.

"I'm not the person you think me, John. You'd find yourself running against my angles at every turn."

There was a tinge of regret in her tone, and he knew that he had got further with Celia than ever before. She turned from him, if with decision, at least, also with regret—that was the most he had ever had from her. He made no comment upon her answer, but continued to look into the fire. He had served seven years for this reward. Possibly, if he went on for another seven— He felt a little bitter toward her, or rather, toward fate; of course, Celia could not help her feeling in the matter; he realized that with a sense of contrition that he should have directed his resentment toward her, even for a moment.

Celia rose with an impulsive movement and stood with her back to the fire, looking about her little house. She was perfectly contented here; she did not need John Weldon, or any other man to make her more so. Yet Weldon made a very nice centre-piece by the fire, she had to admit that. Her gaze came back to him with pleasure; he looked very well in the yellow, flickering light. She remembered, though, that Wrexham had looked even better—more decorative to an interior—but Wrexham's appearance was not so satisfying. There must have been some psychic effect of Weldon's character that made his uncompromising personality appear in the

light of an æsthetic adjunct to Celia's fireside. If it were so, he was quite unconscious of it, though he had a comfortable feeling that she took pleasure in his society that late afternoon.

Such moments are brief, but they are good to remember. Molly broke in upon this one. She ran so lightly up the steps that they didn't hear her, and she followed her knock by opening the front door.

"Anybody home?" she asked, putting in her head.

Celia was startled. "Yes, come in," she managed to say.

"I'm afraid I frightened you," said Molly, excusing her abruptness, and then she saw Weldon standing half in the shadow by the mantelpiece.

"Good evening, Miss Hunter," he said, rather solemnly, Molly thought. He found it hard to change his conversational style so as to admit a third person with sufficient rapidity.

Celia, who was always ready enough, flung the visitor a rope. "We've been talking Christmas-tree," she said.

Weldon did not contradict her, but it seemed to him they had been talking something else, at least for all the time that counted. Molly, too, had a shrewd idea that they had not been talking Christmas-tree, not when she entered, at any rate. Somehow she had not thought of the tin man in a romantic light before.

"But firelight is always romantic," she thought. She felt an indefinable quality in the atmosphere;

she knew she had broken in upon an interesting interview, and she wished she had stayed at home. There was nothing for it now, however, but to keep up a cheerful chatter until the poor man could take himself off. Molly had an instinct for such things, and she made no effort to remove herself by impossible excuses.

"Is Mr. Weldon going to be Santa Claus?" she asked.

"I haven't asked him yet; I was coming to that," said Celia with a seriousness that made him doubt his first easy confidence that the suggestion was made in the way of a pleasantry.

"Oh, no—no—I couldn't do it," he protested in alarm.

"You wouldn't mind it," said Celia.

"Don't plan for me to do that, please," he begged. "Anything else you want, but I've got no turn for that sort of thing. Get Wrexham," he suggested with a sudden inspiration.

"Oh, but you are so much bigger," said Molly.

"You can stuff him," said Weldon, relieved by the mischievous sound of her voice.

"Mr. Weldon is going to give oranges all around," said Celia.

"How nice of him!" Molly cried.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Celia in a slightly proprietary tone.

Weldon had a pleasurable sensation; he was so glad he had thought about the oranges, and he even meditated adding apples to the offering. He was

uncertain on that score, however; it might seem a bid for royal favor, and defeat its own end with a lady of such exacting and delicate taste. It was hard to keep up with the twists and turns of Celia's fancy. Should he get the apples or should he not? He determined to ask Molly; she might be able to advise him.

Weldon had not wanted to see Molly just when she came in, but he liked her, nevertheless. They seemed to understand each other instinctively. He took her home that evening, and he enjoyed the walk—there was something so fresh and natural about her. He liked, too, her frank admiration of Celia.

"Isn't it kind of her to get up this tree?" Molly asked with enthusiasm.

"It's like her," said Weldon. His conviction that Celia possessed all the virtues was evidently deep-seated.

Celia was kind, but her philanthropy was often the result of some whim or fancy. The Christmas-tree amused her; Weldon overlooked that fact, and so did Molly.

"It's so good of you to give the oranges; Miss Northrup seemed so pleased," said Molly.

"Did you think so?" he asked, glad to be confirmed in his opinion. "I thought something of apples," he said.

"Oh, no, I think oranges are much nicer," Molly declared.

"Apples *and* oranges," he said with deep consideration.

"No, that's too much," said Molly positively.

"The children wouldn't think so," he asserted.

"Well, of course, they'd like all they could get, but you have to do things in reason," said Molly, who had been trained to consider expenses. "That would be too much for you to do," she declared again.

"Do you believe she'd think that?" he asked uncertainly.

"I'm sure she would," said Molly.

"I'd be glad to get them," he said, not quite convinced, "only I don't want to seem officious."

"I don't believe you could be that," Molly said, with a sudden personal tone in her voice that Weldon found pleasant. He could get on with Molly in spite of her youth—she was such a sensible girl.

"What I want to know is," he said, indulging in a confidence that was unusual with him, "would she like me to send a whole lot of stuff down here, or would she think I was butting in."

"You mean, would apples be a delicate attention," Molly said laughing.

"Exactly," Weldon answered, and he, too, laughed—Molly understood him so perfectly.

"I'm sure you'd please her," Molly decided, and he thanked her for her advice.

She asked him to come in when they reached her house. He was the sort of man to whom it was never necessary to make excuses for things that were dilapidated or out at elbows; stranger as he was, he seemed to fit very well into that homelike atmosphere, where everything would have seemed

worn and faded had it not been viewed in the radiance of the affection and the life that centred there. Weldon gave a sympathetic response to all that was fine in feeling; he was not a material man.

Molly watched him as he talked with her father, and she thought of Wrexham. What a difference between Weldon and the Englishman—not only a difference in the men, but in the reaction of every one who came in touch with them. Her father was talking easily with Weldon—currents and oyster-beds were the burden of the discussion. She herself felt none of the tension of intercourse with Wrexham, but just a sense of well-being that was agreeable. The house seemed good enough, the chairs were comfortable, the fire was warm, and good feeling prevailed. None of the dreadful lacks that Wrexham's presence had instantly revealed, seemed now to be apparent, and yet he gave something that a man like Weldon could never furnish. The lieutenant was like the touch of scarlet that gives value to a scene, and Molly had a sudden fear that that bit of flame color was more to her than all the rest.

"I'd shrivel up and die without it," she thought, with a panic-stricken realization of the state of mind at which she had arrived.

Wrexham had a sort of fascination for her; she liked to watch him. His very walk was different from that of other people, at least of the other people whom Molly saw. It was not different from that of most fashionable young men of the period—his step was long and lounging, and his shoulders were rounded to the correct hunch,

"He looks like an advertisement for sporting goods," thought Molly, as she saw him cross the lawn next morning on his way to the wharf. A humorous expression touched her face, and she put up the window and called to him: "Mr. Wrexham!"

He turned quickly at the sound of her voice. "Gad, but you look like a morning-glory hanging out of the window," he said. "Isn't there some sort of blooming bush they call that?"

"Don't spoil your compliment," said Molly.

"I was a trifle uncertain. They don't grow in London, but I thought it must be something rather pretty." He threw a glance at Molly that flattered her more than his words.

"Aren't you late this morning?" she asked.

"Oh, perhaps a half-hour or so; one can't always be on the stroke."

"I imagine Mr. Weldon is," said Molly.

"Yes. There's nothing upsets him more, in fact, than for me to roll in a minute to the bad. Rather amusing, you know," he said easily. "I can't fancy how you knew I was late, though," he added, and he faced squarely around to the window as he spoke. "You've never been there before when I went by, or, at least, I've never seen you."

Molly felt that she had been a little stupid. "I tell by the tide," she said with haughtiness, increased by the fact that his suspicions were entirely correct. "The tide has been running out for quite an hour."

"That's remarkably clever of you; I shouldn't have thought of that," he declared.

"You're a nice sailor," she commented.

"Was that why you popped out of the window—to tell me I'd not make a hit in the marines?" he asked.

"No, I wanted to tell you that you'll have to be Santa Claus at Miss Northrup's Christmas-tree," said Molly.

"My aunt, I'll not do it!" he cried. "I never had a silly-looking old guy to come skipping down the chimney to hand me a pasteboard cow in my day, and, believe me, I can't see the necessity of the thing either. Oh, no, I shall not do it," he reiterated with decided emphasis.

Molly laughed; the incongruity of Mr. Wrexham as Santa Claus appealed to her sense of humor.

He disliked being laughed at, even under supposititious conditions, and a shade of annoyance in his face advised Molly of the fact. She was quick at noting such changes, and she had learned to read the lieutenant's face with a fair amount of accuracy.

"I should love to see you act," she said, a note of genuine belief in his powers sounding in her words.

"I'm fairly good in my line," he admitted, "but it's not bouncing comedy stuffed into a red suit. Oh, I've no sort of use for this Santa Claus notion." Then he added, with a sudden smile at his fancy. "Besides, he was a German, you know, and I should think it rather unpatriotic to take the part. I should have to interview the War Office, no doubt. You Americans should not be too keen about him yourselves. Listen to that fellow," he said suddenly. The engine from the distant wharf was tooting with impatience.

"Is that Mr. Weldon?" Molly asked.

"Yes, he's rather dippy about getting off on time. Why, I can't fancy; there's no particular rush on that I can see."

"He wants to catch the tide," said Molly.

"Catch the tide! You people talk about it as though you were catching a train. It doesn't leave on the minute, you know, and, besides, the darned thing is always running in or out."

Again Weldon's engine shrieked in the distance. Wrexham lit a cigarette. "If he thinks that's the way to get me, he's mistaken," he said.

"Do go on," Molly urged.

"Why, I should have been there if you hadn't stopped me," he replied.

"It was important," said Molly, with a touch of demureness in her manner.

"Very much so," said the lieutenant earnestly. He came close below the window as he spoke and observed the vine that clambered there, and over to the piazza railing. It was a tough old wistaria, able to bear much more than the weight of blossoms that would adorn it in the spring. Two steps upward in its gnarled branches brought him to the window.

"How should I do for Romeo?" he asked.

"You're too modern," said Molly promptly, though she thought that young Montague could scarcely have climbed to Juliet's balcony with more grace.

"I never saw the blooming play, but I've a notion the lady must have given him some encourage-

ment, you know," he said, with a very audacious air.

Molly pulled down the window; the lieutenant caught it just in time.

"Oh, I say, I was merely talking of that Shakespeare stuff," he explained, and added in a deeper tone: "You are uncommonly shy about letting a fellow know you like him."

"I don't like people who think they are irresistible," said Molly.

"Gad, but I'm only trying to keep myself cheerful," he assured her.

Weldon's whistle came again, loud and prolonged.

"He's going to leave you," said Molly.

"Let him," said the lieutenant. He threw away his cigarette, and swung himself up to the window-sill.

"Please go on," Molly begged.

"Do you think I came up here just to get down again?" he asked. He leaned around so that he faced Molly as she balanced on the sill from within. The situation was awkward; she could not get away from him without going backward out of the window herself, or sending him off as an alternative. He laughed at the alarm in her face.

"If you kiss me I shall never speak to you again," she said, in a low tense voice.

He knew she meant it, and he drew back. He was not the type of man that enjoys dragging off a woman by the hair of her head. "I had no intention of being so impertinent," he said.

"Well, you looked that way," said Molly, feeling rather flat as she excused her fears.

"You misunderstood me," said the lieutenant, but he laughed in subtle denial of his words, so that Molly recovered her complacency. Suddenly he leaped down. "I must get aboard the puff boat," he decided.

"You'd better run," Molly advised.

"I shall not do it," he replied. "I never run."

He must have caught the boat, nevertheless, for Molly went out on the bluff when she heard the motor get under way a few minutes later, and, sheltered by the cedar bushes, she saw two figures in the little boat that was disappearing down the blue, sunlit river. She stood there for a while and watched it; then she went around to the spot where the lieutenant had climbed the wistaria vine. Just as she feared, he had stepped on the hyacinths that were coming up beneath her window. She sat down on the dry grass, the better to estimate the damage done—only three of the little shoots had been broken. And he did look like Romeo, in spite of being modern. Molly found it hard to get to work that morning; she had promised to dress dolls for Celia. The few days before Christmas are too busy to permit dreams of Romeo.

The tree materialized brilliantly, even without a Santa Claus. Celia found the church too restricted, so she transferred the festivities to her own back yard, where a pine sapling was set up on Christmas eve, aromatic and fresh, under a cloudless, starry sky. Orion inspected it with suspicion, taking many sniffs, and many cautious steps in and out beneath

its branches. At last he went away, quite satisfied, to pursue his own activities.

Celia was up with the sun on Christmas morning, but Weldon had got to work on the tree before she came out. He had strung all the top of it with the glittering decorations that Mrs. Lovell, in a hastily adjusted toilet, had handed him around the edge of the back door.

"They look like big drops of blue and red dew," said Celia, arriving upon the scene at length to survey his work.

"Merry Christmas," said Weldon.

"Merry Christmas; I forgot," said Celia.

He came down from his ladder and sat beside her on the steps to see the effect of his work. The crisp morning air was delicious, and the sunlight came in long, brilliant shafts through the pines. There was a purity about it all, an impersonal quality, as though the day had not yet been given over to man that he might mar it with his passion and his pride.

"A lovely Christmas morning, clear and cool," said Celia. She hated to leave its contemplation and begin bringing out the drums and horns, and all the rest.

Celia did not know just what the extent of her entertainment would be, until the guests began to assemble. They came from all directions in groups, each bow-legged little darky, whose wont had been to run freely through the woods, now firmly held by the hand of an elderly and temporary guide.

The back gate was thrown open, but Lizzie, Miss Northrup's cook, marshalled the procession in the road before she admitted it—singing.

Lizzie was the high soprano in the choir, and her ear-splitting tones were easy to follow as she led the long line, marching by twos, around the circuit of the fence.

“Over Jordan, over Jordan!
Yes, we'll rest our weary feet
By the crystal waters sweet.”

The breeze swayed the branches of the Christmas-tree, and the red and blue decorations sparkled in the sun. The smaller guests gazed in silent admiration and forgot to sing about their “weary feet”; beneath the tree appeared the dolls and the drums. Lizzie was not yet ready for the supreme moment; she started another hymn, a hymn out of the book. Lizzie belonged to the advanced and cultured element that always sang out of the book. She decried the strange, melodious improvisations of her people in an earlier period. The older generation, that day, however, was out in force; a strong falsetto, at the end of the procession, jumped to the lead when the hymn was over:

“Mary an' Mart'a, Loup an' Jawn,
Don't you see,
Don't you see!
Mary an' Mart'a, Loup an' Jawn,
Don't you see,
My Lord!”

Instantly fifty voices joined in. Lizzie herself and the younger negroes were swept along; songs like that they had been raised on, before they learned to read out of the book. Rich bassos and barytones from the circle outside the fence swelled the sound.

“Mary an’ Mart’a, Loup an’ Jawn,
Stop dat train an’ lemme git on.”

Celia had not heard those familiar cadences for many a year. She sat on the steps with Molly, and they both joined in, for they knew all the verses.

“Joshua he was a ’ceitful man,
Don’t you see,
Don’t you see!”

“A bit hard on the little duffers who are waiting for the presents, even if he was,” the lieutenant remarked to Weldon. “They can’t help it—about Joshua, you know.”

It was true; Joshua did not seem to have much to do with the Christmas-tree, but the red and blue dewdrops would not vanish with the sun, and the dolls would keep their smiles, not to speak of their arms and legs, all the longer for the delay. The hour for distributing the presents would surely come, and in the meantime——

“Lightnin’ flashin’ an’ t’under roll,
Devil goin’ to clap on de naked soul.”

Celia rose when the last verse ended and called:
"Merry Christmas to all!"

"Chris'mas gif'! Chris'mas gif'!" shouted her
guests in the time-honored reply.

CHAPTER XI

CELIA found her mail disturbing one January morning. The new year was well under way, and she had settled to a life of quiet routine after the effort of the Christmas-tree, when there arrived a letter, in a small, eccentric hand.

"Aunt Maria!" she said, looking at it with misgiving.

"What's the matter with her?" Mrs. Lovell asked uneasily. Celia's Aunt Maria was one of the people who tried her nerves.

"She's coming," said Celia, without looking up from her letter.

"When?" Mrs. Lovell put down her crocheting in concern.

"She doesn't say exactly. 'I'll be down soon; arrange to have pigs' feet for breakfast,'" Celia read aloud.

"What she can see in pigs' feet I can't make out," Mrs. Lovell exclaimed.

"I hate 'em," said Celia, but her tone sounded too irritated for the subject under discussion.

"I thought you were fond of your Aunt Maria," Mrs. Lovell remarked.

"I said I hated pigs' feet," Celia replied.

"Me, too. I can never get anything off of 'em," the older lady declared.

"I wonder how long we'll have to keep on the lookout for her," Celia said, continuing her plaint.

"She says 'soon,'" Mrs. Lovell suggested.

"That may mean to-day, and it may mean next week."

"Well, we can't have pigs' feet to-day," Mrs. Lovell said decidedly.

"I'll expect her when I see her," Celia remarked, determined to be as comfortable as she could in the interim.

"Maria Hightower is a law unto herself," Mrs. Lovell said, shaking her head as though she could find no explanation of the mystery. "How many heirs are there to her property?" she asked, after a moment's meditation.

"I don't know," said Celia; such inferences always annoyed her. "Aunt Maria will have time to quarrel with us all and cut us off, and she probably will, for we are none of us too amiable."

Mrs. Lovell made no reply to this. "You'll need my room," she said with sudden decision.

"Of course I won't," said Celia. "I'll give Aunt Maria the front room."

"She'd rather have mine, it's much warmer," Mrs. Lovell insisted, and it was clear that she had made up her mind to some course of action. "This will be a good time for me to pay that visit to Mattie Lou that I've been talking about," she explained.

Celia hated to acquiesce too readily, but the thought of Mrs. Lovell and her Aunt Maria in conjunction was nerve-racking. Mrs. Hightower had a

caustic tongue, and, finding Mrs. Lovell's vagueness annoying, she tormented the poor lady unceasingly.

"I guess Mattie Lou would be mad with me if I kept you the whole year around," said Celia.

Mrs. Lovell sighed. "I'm fond of Mattie, Celia, but those children of hers almost drive me crazy."

"They are dreadful," Celia agreed feelingly.

"How long do you suppose your aunt is going to stay?"

"Till she gets tired, I reckon," said Celia, lapsing into the vernacular. She had always a hopeless feeling about her aunt's visits; interesting though Mrs. Hightower was as a personality, no one could deny that she was difficult.

Mrs. Lovell felt that some haste would be advisable as to her own movements, and she wrote to Mattie Lou that very night. It took a strong incentive to bring her to the point of putting pen to paper. The act was "motivated" now, however, to speak in the exalted language of modern scholasticism. Celia helped her pack, and the move was made just in time, for the trunk was actually being transferred from the house to Zeke's wagon, when through the back gateway, cleared for the egress of Mrs. Lovell's baggage, rolled an automobile, piled with trunks and satchels. There were even a basket and two band-boxes, and Mrs. Hightower, autocratic in expression, imposing in her furs, was on the back seat. She looked like a dowager empress, at least.

Celia and Mrs. Lovell were hovering in the wake of Zeke and his assistant as they carried out Mrs.

Lovell's modest trunk. They did not notice the approach of Mrs. Hightower's machine, for automobiles passed frequently upon the road near by.

"Mind the glass door," Celia cautioned.

"Take care! Don't turn that trunk upside down," said Mrs. Lovell.

Zeke and the small boy at the forward end of the trunk were trying their best to obey directions, when the sudden honk of the machine, right in the yard, caused disastrous results. The boy jumped in alarm and let go his hold. He barely saved his feet from the edge of the trunk, as it came thumping down the steps. Zeke, giving tongue to his displeasure, dragged back violently, and swung on the balustrade, and the old horse, startled by the commotion on all sides, plunged forward with increasing disregard of surroundings. Zeke divided his vocal effort between his son and his beast, and Celia cried out for her newly made strawberry-bed, for which the horse was heading. Mrs. Lovell's concern was centred in her trunk.

"Has it broken open?" she called, coming half-way down the steps to find out for herself.

"Who's this making a getaway?" asked Mrs. Hightower with interest.

"Aunt Maria!" cried Celia, hurrying out.

Mrs. Lovell was arrested in the act of bending over her trunk.

"You ought to tie that trunk up in tissue-paper, Emily Lovell," Mrs. Hightower called from her point of observation.

Celia ran out to the automobile, and her aunt handed out a basket with care.

"I knew you wouldn't get the pigs' feet, so I brought 'em along," she said. "Does your cook know how to cook 'em?"

"I guess so," said Celia.

"I guess not. I'll show her; I've shown a hundred niggers how to cook pigs' feet," Mrs. Hightower replied.

Lizzie was called to take the basket, and more small bundles were handed from the automobile. The chauffeur was getting out the trunks, and Mrs. Hightower summoned Zeke to his assistance. Already the boy, who had dropped Mrs. Lovell's trunk, was staggering along with a bulging suitcase. Mrs. Lovell herself had an armful of rugs, and Celia bore a bandbox.

"Weh mus' put 'em?" the boy inquired; he was following Lizzie to the house.

"Put it on the mantelpiece," Mrs. Hightower advised caustically. The boy looked rather shamefaced at that, but Zeke and Lizzie laughed. The chauffeur was white, and of the variety that never laughs.

Mrs. Lovell, between the accident to her own trunk and the commotion that Mrs. Hightower caused, looked a little bewildered.

Celia helped her aunt to alight. It was astounding what an atmosphere of life and activity seemed to be created by Mrs. Hightower's presence. She turned and surveyed the premises.

"Was Emily Lovell trying to escape before I got here?" she demanded.

"She's been wanting to visit Mattie Lou for some time," Celia explained.

"Can Mattie Lou get on with you, Emily?" Mrs. Hightower inquired.

"I'm sure I don't know why she shouldn't get on with me," Mrs. Lovell exclaimed in an injured tone.

"I asked for information; mighty few people can get on with me," Mrs. Hightower remarked.

"I certainly try not to give offense," said Mrs. Lovell.

"You certainly do, Emily Lovell; you wouldn't give offense to a fly," her tormentor agreed.

"Oh, yes, she would; she's death to flies," said Celia.

Mrs. Hightower had lost interest. "Where's that little black bag?" she demanded. "Here, boy!"

Zeke and his son and the white chauffeur all came promptly to attention.

"Where's my black bag?" Mrs. Hightower never hesitated about letting her suspicions be known. General search was made, and in the disturbance, Mrs. Lovell almost forgot her fears about getting left. Suddenly they returned to her.

"Don't let me miss that car, Celia," she said uneasily.

Mrs. Hightower overheard the reminder, though it was made in a voice not intended for her ears.

"What's the use of waiting for a trolley-car?"

she demanded. "This man here has got to take his machine back to town; you get right in it, and put your trunk in too."

"Oh, I couldn't," said Mrs. Lovell in alarm. "I haven't got on my—" Her voice trailed off.

"What haven't you got on?" Mrs. Hightower inquired.

"My hat," Mrs. Lovell replied.

"Well, you can put it on."

"That's too expensive a way of travelling," Celia objected, knowing something of Mrs. Lovell's state of mind.

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Hightower. "He's charged me enough for six people already." She stepped to the edge of the piazza and struck a bargain with the chauffeur; what's more, she paid him in advance.

Mrs. Lovell felt herself in the grip of destiny. She was in mortal terror of fast driving; besides, she had not expected to leave for quite an hour.

"I don't like automobiles, Maria," she protested helplessly.

"It's time you were getting over that foolishness. You don't want to be a back number, do you? Keep up with the times. Go on, now, get your hat."

Celia was flying about collecting Mrs. Lovell's things. "You'll have a very comfortable trip in town, and the man will take you right to the depot," she assured her.

"If he doesn't run into something on the way," Mrs. Lovell answered. "How much am I to pay

him?" she whispered, when they were out of ear-shot of Mrs. Hightower.

"Aunt Maria has already paid him," Celia told her.

"I guess she can afford it," Mrs. Lovell remarked in an injured tone.

"Perfectly," said Celia. "Don't worry about that."

Mrs. Lovell indulged in a subdued, but effective snort. "I'm not worrying," she exclaimed. "If Maria Hightower wants me to get killed, she can just foot the bill."

"You are not going to be killed; Aunt Maria came out here all right," Celia reminded her.

"Yes, but she can manage that man. If he wanted to drive right into the creek, I couldn't stop him," Mrs. Lovell said truly.

"Well, he's not going to drive into the creek; he has himself to think of, too," said Celia.

"They are awfully reckless, Celia," the poor lady complained.

Mrs. Hightower loomed in the doorway. "Come on, that fellow will be running up his charge if you wait."

"I'm very much obliged to you," Mrs. Lovell said feebly. She knew that automobiles "came high," and in spite of her fears she was beginning to feel a slightly pleasurable excitement at the turn affairs had taken.

"What's the use of being obliged, when you don't want to go?" Mrs. Hightower inquired.

"I suppose you mean to be kind," Mrs. Lovell replied.

"Don't you go around supposing that about people in this world; it'll break your spirit," Mrs. Hightower remarked. "Hurry up," she said.

Hurry made Mrs. Lovell particularly nervous. "I don't know where all my things are," she said.

"They are all out in the machine," said Celia, for the boy had been called in for the suitcase, and Lizzie had carried out the umbrella. "You needn't hurry at all, there's no reason for it," she added.

Mrs. Hightower had gone out again to superintend the transfer of the trunk, which Zeke was loath to surrender.

There was an odd contrast between the two older women. They were of the same generation, class, and traditions, yet money, disposition, and brains had worked a striking difference in their bearing and expression. It was never more apparent than when Mrs. Lovell took the seat in the automobile so lately vacated by Mrs. Hightower. Mrs. Hightower's size seemed to befit a person of consequence, Mrs. Lovell's to bespeak inaction. One woman appeared to direct her career, the other seemed a leaf upon the tide of circumstance as she was borne off in the big machine.

"Your selection of Emily Lovell as a companion makes me doubt your intelligence, Celia," Mrs. Hightower remarked to her niece.

"Mrs. Lovell is a nice, neutral background," Celia explained.

"I suppose she's harmless," said Mrs. Hightower, "but I prefer a background that can hold up if you lean on it, and, as for neutrals, I don't like 'em."

There was, indeed, nothing neutral about Mrs. Hightower. She was a positive quantity, and she was accustomed to holding the centre of the stage. Celia knew that she would sigh for Mrs. Lovell's unexacting and comfortable society in spite of the amusing gifts that her aunt undoubtedly possessed.

Mrs. Hightower was frankly curious about Celia's new house. "I can't make out whether it's a retreat or an investment," she declared, as they pulled up their chairs to the fire after supper. "I didn't know you had enough head for business to make an investment that was worth anything, though."

"You think it's a good piece of property?" Celia asked. She had not thought of it in that light.

"Pretty good, I fancy—automobile road, electric car-line, access to the river—pretty good." Mrs. Hightower had a shrewd estimate of values.

"I don't like to catalogue its points, as though it were for sale," Celia objected.

"Then it's a retreat," said Mrs. Hightower. "Very pretty, very idyllic, and it has two advantages over a sisterhood—it's not filled up with women, and you can get out of it when you want to."

"You don't like women, do you?" Celia asked, smiling.

"Oh, yes, I like 'em—in moderation," her aunt replied. "Have you given up all hope of getting married, Celia?"

"Call it idea," Celia urged.

"It's all the same," Mrs. Hightower insisted; "every normal woman hopes to get married."

"She may hope to meet the right man," said Celia.

"The right man is merely an expression used for convenience. It means the man you have to do the least amount of adjusting with. I've had three husbands, and they were all good men, but it took grace to live with 'em."

Celia laughed; she had not considered her aunt to possess any large amount of grace. "You were in luck to get three good men," she commented.

"No luck about it; I picked 'em out. When a woman makes a mistake, it's either because she doesn't use the wits she was started out with, or because she wasn't started out with any to use. I don't think I shall marry again," Mrs. Hightower remarked with a meditative air.

Celia was startled; the possibility of her aunt's marrying again had never come into her mind.

"You see," the lady explained, "I'd lose ten thousand a year if I did, and that's not to be sneezed at. It happened in the most unexpected way. Nelson Hightower asked me one day if I didn't think a woman ought to be protected against men who might try to marry her for her money. I said yes, I thought it would be a very good thing if she could be. I wasn't thinking much of what he was talking about, and, bless my soul, he went right down to his lawyer and fixed up that clause in his will—to

protect me. Think of it. I didn't need protection even when I began my career, and now, it's oppressive—that's what it is. If I didn't lose so much I would marry again anyway, just to be sure I could."

"Have you anybody picked out, Aunt Maria?" Celia asked.

"My child, with money you can do the thing indefinitely," Mrs. Hightower exclaimed. "There was an Italian count I thought something of marrying—before this war, that was. He would have been satisfied with what I had left, but I decided that an Italian title is not worth ten thousand a year."

"Then Uncle Hightower was right," said Celia.

"In a way," her aunt admitted, "but I'm sorry I let him do it just the same. He was one of the best of men, always trying to protect me. You see, he could never realize that I'm not the kind that needs protection. Yet a woman's better off married," Mrs. Hightower said reflectively. "Where you made your mistake, Celia, was in not taking John Weldon when you had the chance."

Celia started at the mention of Weldon's name. "You liked him?" she asked.

"Well, I can't say I found him entertaining, but he's a good solid man—the kind that will admire you, and not expect you to admire him. I don't like a man who needs an audience and keeps his wife sitting in the front row."

"And you don't think John Weldon is that kind?" Celia asked meditatively.

Her aunt looked at her with a shrewd expression. "You seem to be weighing your past opportunities very carefully."

Celia laughed. "John Weldon is here now," she said.

"Where?"

"Right here. He's doing government work—coast survey."

"Married?" asked Mrs. Hightower.

"No, and not likely to be."

"Well, there are not many people who have a chance to retrieve their errors," said Mrs. Hightower pointedly.

Celia made no answer; she liked John Weldon too much to discuss him in such a bald sort of way with her aunt. She felt, too, that Mrs. Hightower, while estimating him very well as a safe, comfortable person, quite missed the finer points of his nature. To be sure, it was the same estimate that Celia herself had put upon him, in her reflections upon the subject, but she knew really that there was something very much more than all this in Weldon. He had a fineness of fibre and feeling that was rare, so rare that she had not known its value in the less experienced days of yore.

There was one serious objection to Mrs. Hightower as a guest, she was not addicted to reading, or rather, she read only the more sensational of the newspapers—and those she read aloud. Celia remembered this peculiarity with a feeling of despair. She was developing peculiarities of her own, and they were of

the literary and reflective type. She liked to put long periods of silence between her periods of conversation; her mental and spiritual equilibrium seemed to demand that arrangement. Mrs. Hightower, on the contrary, liked to talk—all the time.

Suddenly the thought of Lieutenant Wrexham flashed into Celia's mind; he would be lively enough to entertain Aunt Maria. She fancied the two would hit it off very well together in spite of the difference in years that lay between them. She would bring up the young man and let them amuse each other. Two worldlings, each adrift in quiet waters, they ought to hail each other with joy. Celia was fond of her aunt; she found her enlivening, but she felt inadequate to meet the demand for entertainment where there were no theatres, no cafés, and few people to offer assistance. It is not to be wondered at that the thought of the lieutenant seemed an inspiration—a promise of help in urgent necessity.

"There's a young Englishman here," she began.

"What's he doing here? Why isn't he getting killed in France?" Mrs. Hightower demanded at once.

"He's been to France."

"Lose an arm or a leg?"

Celia had to admit that he had not.

"Blinded?"

"No."

"Go on," said her aunt.

"He was in hospital in England after the battle

of the Aisne, and when his nerves and his heart were in better shape, he was sent to the States."

"For safe-keeping," Mrs. Hightower remarked.

"Well, he doesn't pose as a hero. He's under orders, though, and he's going back—eventually. I'll admit he isn't exactly a war lord, but he has been through a great deal, and physically his nerve control seems to be in pretty bad order."

"He probably shattered his system before he went to war," said Mrs. Hightower.

"Possibly; I don't know," Celia replied with a slight irritation evident in her tone. She realized she had made a mistake in trying to excite her aunt's interest in the lieutenant. He could have spoken for himself to much better advantage, for Mrs. Hightower was so constituted that she opposed all ideas presented to her. Concretely, she accepted people and things for what they were worth, and her estimates were usually correct, but she had to work out everything for herself—in the abstract she was suspicious. Young Englishmen travelling for their health need to be explained just now, yet Celia was disposed in favor of a man who had been at the Marne and the Aisne; she permitted him a temporary residence in America, particularly as he enjoyed it at the discretion of the British War Office.

Not so, Mrs. Hightower. "How do you know he's not a deserter?" she demanded.

"Because he has shown me his furlough from the War Office," Celia said, and she said it so sharply

that it sounded very much as though she were quarrelling with her Aunt Maria on the subject of the lieutenant.

Mrs. Hightower never objected to a light engagement of the kind, however, and she always maintained her equanimity throughout, so that hostilities were merely spicy episodes in relations otherwise amicable.

"How old is he?" she asked, leaving the matter of his credentials for future decision.

"He's of marriageable age," Celia replied with sarcasm, answering what she knew to be the purport of her aunt's question.

"Too young for you, I dare say," Mrs. Hightower remarked.

"I don't know," said Celia coolly.

"Maybe not," said her aunt. "I think you're better-looking than you were when you were a girl; you never did have much color."

Celia always found her aunt's standards infuriating—all gifts of mind and person were considered solely in their bearing upon the opposite sex.

"How I came to have an old maid for a niece is more than I can understand," the lady exclaimed resignedly.

"It's a judgment on you for being so scornful of them," Celia told her.

"It may not be too late," said Mrs. Hightower. "Bring in your Englishman. I'll take a look at him. The sight of a rich relation in declining years might get him to the point."

"You may fancy him for yourself," Celia suggested.

"Possibly. You needn't mention the vanishing ten thousand." Mrs. Hightower had a droll smile, and, whenever they clashed, Celia always found herself somewhat placated by the merry look in her aunt's eyes—the sudden, confidential appeal to her sense of humor and her understanding.

"Good, bad, or indifferent, old or young, maimed or sound, I'd rather look at him than at a pine tree," Mrs. Hightower confessed. She was not given to the pleasures of country living, nor enlivened by the beauties of unadulterated nature.

"I'm afraid you're going to be horribly bored here," said Celia.

"When I am I'll move on," said her aunt. "I'm going to Palm Beach. That'll cheer me after visiting my nearest relative."

Celia laughed. "You are an old sinner, Aunt Maria."

"So are you. You ought to be going around with me, and amusing me, instead of sitting back here in the woods, with nobody but John Weldon and this English infant to pass the time of day with."

"There's a dear girl here," said Celia.

"No doubt, but I mean men," Mrs. Hightower explained.

Yet Molly scored with Celia's Aunt Maria. They met upon the river-front. Mrs. Hightower was surveying with a comprehensive glance the few houses that faced the bluff, and she turned the same

gaze upon Molly, who was having a game of croquet with Robert and Jimmy. Molly surveyed Mrs. Hightower, too, but she did it in a less obvious manner. She perceived the atmosphere, though, which the lady carried about with her; it was one of wealth, dignity, and assurance, and it pleased Molly's fancy. Such living testimony to the great world without attracted her strangely. She threw down her mallet and went to speak to Miss Northrup's aunt.

Mrs. Hightower looked her over as she crossed the lawn. Molly could almost feel the penetrating glance. She held herself very straight as she walked, but she paid her respects properly.

"I'm very well," Mrs. Hightower responded, "but I realize when I see you girls that I haven't the back I once had."

"Backache must be very trying; I've never had it," said Molly.

"Backache, I should hope not! That went out of fashion twenty years ago. Girls have to be athletic nowadays no matter what kind of backs they have. But there are not many whose backbones are worth considering—a good one can make a woman without another beauty." Mrs. Hightower had a way of asserting her opinion as though argument were beyond reason, so Molly did not dispute the point. The value of a back-bone as an asset in personal appearance was a new idea to her. She gathered, however, that Mrs. Hightower approved of hers, and the realization gave her confidence.

"I never thought about people's back-bones before," she said.

"That's because you don't understand points," said Mrs. Hightower. "When I was a girl I was silly enough to worry about my complexion—I put everything known to woman on my face, but leather it was, and leather it has remained. I didn't care, though, as soon as I got sense enough to appreciate my back-bone. It's been my main dependence in point of looks, and it's apt to outlast all the things that are so admired in the beginning. What are you doing here?" Mrs. Hightower inquired, suddenly leaving the subject of discussion.

"I live over there," said Molly, pointing to her house.

Mrs. Hightower threw a brief glance at the house; clearly its lines did not command the admiration that she bestowed so frankly upon Molly. "But how have you been occupying yourself?"

"Just growing up," said Molly.

"Like a mocking-bird, with your mouth open, expecting choice bits to fall into it, I dare say," Mrs. Hightower remarked.

Molly laughed. "Pretty much so, I guess." She liked this vivid, unusual personality. There was a youthful quality about Mrs. Hightower that time and worldliness could not kill. Molly found her companionable, which accounts for the fact that Mrs. Hightower found herself growing younger in Molly's society. Molly had not had very many companions of her own age, and she adapted her-

self to older people with a facility that girls who are raised entirely in the atmosphere of their own generation never acquire.

"Don't help me up and down places. I'd rather fall over 'em," Mrs. Hightower warned her as they strolled along together.

Molly laughed; there was a frankness and a poise about Mrs. Hightower, a way of going straight to her point, and not caring what foibles her remarks might reveal, that suggested the lieutenant. It may have been only the generic similarity between people of the same large world. Molly suspected as much, and she thought with all the more longing of the interesting phases of life that she had never seen. Perhaps she never would see them; she would probably spend all of her days right here where she was spending her youth. Of course, she might marry. The thought of Edie Ingot flushed her face at that suggestion. No, she would not marry. "Where would I ever see anybody that I could marry?" she asked herself, carefully overlooking the lieutenant as a possible claimant of her attention. The lieutenant was a type, nothing more.

"You remind me of Mr. Wrexham," she said to Mrs. Hightower suddenly.

"And who is Mr. Wrexham?"

"He's a young Englishman who is here," said Molly.

Mrs. Hightower did not mention the fact that she had heard of him. "Wounded?" she asked.

"No. Didn't Miss Northrup tell you about him?"

"She did say something about an Englishman," Mrs. Hightower admitted.

"It's the same one," Molly answered; "and he speaks his mind just as you do."

"Englishmen can have the worst manners of anybody in the world, except, of course, old women," Mrs. Hightower commented, "but they're very good style," she added.

"That's what he says," cried Molly.

"A young Englishman stuck away in this corner must find difficulty in amusing himself," said Mrs. Hightower.

"He amuses us," said Molly. "He has seen so much, and known so many interesting people."

"I dare say he enjoys an audience—men do," the older lady commented. "How does he exist without an affair of the heart?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I never asked him," replied Molly, and to her annoyance she felt herself blushing.

Mrs. Hightower was discreetly unobservant. "You should follow my rule about asking questions—never insist upon being told the truth, and you can ask anything you want."

"But what's the use, if you are not to get the right answer?" Molly demanded.

"There's no right answer to anything outside of the arithmetic book, and subterfuges are as illuminating as anything else," her companion replied.

"Were you ever in London?" Molly asked.

"Yes, I've lived in London. My first husband was an attaché at the legation."

"Then you know about the Guards."

"Yes, I know about the Guards—as trifling a set as you'll find."

"They have a splendid war record," Molly asserted.

"I'm not talking about their war record."

"Mr. Wrexham is a Guard—an Irish Guard," said Molly casually.

"They're all the same," Mrs. Hightower remarked, "and very few of them are marrying men."

"That's the oddest expression," Molly exclaimed, struck by its use again. Her air was one of annoyance.

Mrs. Hightower seemed amused. "You've heard it before, then?" she said, her eyes upon Molly as she spoke.

"Yes, I've heard it before," said Molly with constraint.

"They can't marry on their pay," Mrs. Hightower explained. "They've got expensive tastes."

The same conclusive tone that Mr. Wrexham had used! Molly was exasperated at this calm acceptance of an ignoble attitude.

"Is the whole question one of money?" she demanded.

"Largely so," said Mrs. Hightower.

"I don't believe it," said Molly defiantly. There

were glances and tones of Mr. Wrexham's in her remembrance as she spoke.

"On what grounds do you base your opinion?" Mrs. Hightower asked.

"On general grounds. I don't believe men are as selfish and as sordid as you say."

She seemed, in her youth, the simplicity of her dress, and the purity of her coloring, like faith combating worldly experience. Mrs. Hightower looked her part very well. "I'm talking of men in the Guards, not of mankind in general," she said.

"Well, the Guards are typical," Molly asserted.

"How many have you known?"

"One," Molly was compelled by truth to answer.

"He must be a very estimable young man," Mrs. Hightower observed.

Molly thought of Mr. Wrexham, and knew that the conclusion was not justified. A smile twitched at her lips, yet she was angry too. Why should this shrewd old woman force her into what sounded almost like a confession of faith in the lieutenant? Mrs. Hightower saw that Molly was resentful, but she did not care; she liked the girl, and there was something else she felt it would be well to say.

"Perhaps I'm mistaken; your Guardsman may be a marrying man after all, but he'll never marry a poor girl."

The words and the tone sounded to Molly inexorable and fateful. They chilled her, yet an instinctive reserve gave her protection against Mrs. Hightower's keen glance, and keener understanding.

"Well, they say it's as easy to fall in love with a rich girl as a poor one," she said with a smile. It was a very self-possessed smile, and it won Mrs. Hightower's complete approval.

"She'll never make a door-mat of herself for anybody," the lady decided, but she suspected that Molly's young heart might be seriously involved, nevertheless, and Molly herself was assailed by the same suspicion.

CHAPTER XII

LIEUTENANT WREXHAM was invited to supper with Mrs. Hightower. The invitation was an undoubted tribute to his social talent, for young men, in the pride of their youth, are not often asked to meet ladies of Mrs. Hightower's years. It may also be said, however, that ladies of Mrs. Hightower's years are seldom so in harmony with youth as to warrant such an invitation. Celia felt that they would find a great deal to say to each other. They did; they quarrelled with extreme interest, and with frankness of the most high-bred variety on both sides, from the moment of meeting. It is astonishing how many unpleasant things people skilled in the art may manage to say to each other while observing the forms of polite society.

Wrexham was distrustful of dowagers; he knew them to be cool and calculating, unaffected by the glamour with which men of fashion are often surrounded, uninfluenced by the charm of personality, upon which he, at least, was able to count. He recognized Mrs. Hightower's type and, though it commanded his respect, he remarked to himself as he executed his bow: "Darned unpleasant old hag."

Mrs. Hightower surveyed him, and dismissed some of the doubts she had had as to the truth of

his claim to social consideration. "He's a Guard," she decided. She had had an affair with a Guardsman once—a captain in the Coldstreams—when, as she had said, her first husband was an attaché at the embassy in London. It had been rather an instructive affair for the captain in the Coldstreams, and Mrs. Hightower herself had gathered some experience. She, too, knew the type. Yes, this was a Guardsman. His mustache was very much smaller than that worn by the Coldstream captain whom Mrs. Hightower had known forty years ago, the fit of his clothes was snugger, and he brushed his hair in rather a different fashion, but she caught a whiff of the bergamot as the lieutenant bowed.

"So that's in style again," she thought, with some amusement in the discovery. She was right. Wrexham was of more interest than a pine tree, though perhaps not so useful. "He's a worthless dog," Mrs. Hightower decided, aided no doubt by her memory of the Guardsman who had engaged her attention so long before.

A woman of Mrs. Hightower's experience is seldom mistaken, and yet in this case she was not entirely right. Wrexham was not quite worthless, and he had possibilities in his nature which might keep him from being a dog, were they properly encouraged. These were things too fine for Mrs. Hightower's vision. Her mental perception, excellent as it was, had its limit, and her spiritual insight, which should have begun at that limit, was

lacking. That was where she fell short. She had seldom occasion to realize any deficiency, however, for the finer possibilities so seldom reach their growth that her estimate usually proved correct, and her confidence in her powers increased. Life would have been sweetened, though, for Mrs. Hightower could she have been aware that the yearning for the higher things may sometimes come even to a man like Wrexham.

"Your command is in France?" she inquired.

"Pardon me, I am not permitted to say," he replied.

Celia was annoyed; she could see, that for some unexplained reason, "the fight was on."

"Why, everybody knows it's in France," she said. "I saw such an interesting account just the other day of an offensive in which the Irish Guards took part."

"Ah?" said the lieutenant. He had devoured the account himself, but he spoke with indifference.

"The Guards are having rather a rough time of it," he said casually.

"Pleasanter at Saint James's," said Mrs. Hightower.

"Undoubtedly."

"They say you men have the finest cooking in London," she remarked, "though I don't believe myself it's any better than that at the Savoy."

"Oh, I say, you've been to London," he exclaimed. In spite of his feeling of antagonism to Mrs. Hightower, there was a gleam of pleasure in his eyes as he leaned forward in the interest of dis-

covering that she knew his world. Celia saw his expression and knew that he was launched.

"Not even the royal family live better than we do," he declared. "You see, one of the old Kings left money in his will to provide for our table."

"George the Third," said Mrs. Hightower.

"Very probably, and we feel it would be disloyal not to carry out his wishes, so we do."

"Yes, you do," said Mrs. Hightower. "A German spy will get into your kitchen some day, and put arsenic into the purée."

"Oh, I fancy not. Besides, one eats rather slowly, and a poison could be detected, but with the wine it is different. It is all uncorked at the table—glass, you know. One might drink a bottle and get a spoonful of powdered glass without knowing the difference. We have good wine, too; it would be a shame to spoil it with glass."

"I suppose you hadn't considered doing without it," said Mrs. Hightower.

"I can't say that we had," he replied, and then he grew excited with a sudden remembrance of what he had seen in the near-by town. Somebody had got very drunk, and made a public spectacle of himself.

"You Americans are scarcely the ones to talk," he said. "I've been in all the capitals of Europe, but I never saw anything like the drinking in this little borough up the road here."

"Why, there aren't any men in our town now," said Celia. "They're all on the way to France."

"There are a few oldish ones left," the lieutenant remarked, "and they go things rather strong. Of course I've seen low fellows drunk in the street in Europe, but never a gentleman."

"You're right there," said Mrs. Hightower. "A gentleman shouldn't let the thing get ahead of him."

"No, believe me," said the lieutenant. "I drink, but not like these men. I should be dismissed from the Guards, and I should not be asked about by decent people if I did. In America it's taken as an excuse for anything. 'Oh, yes, he popped off his pistol, but he was drunk,' you say. He was drunk. My word, think of it! Dreadful little bounders they are, too. I shouldn't call them gentlemen even when they are sober." He stroked his mustache in supercilious scorn.

"What is your idea of a gentleman?" Mrs. Hightower inquired curtly.

"It's a fellow who isn't a bounder," he replied.

"And the men you keep out of the Guards are bounders?"

"Yes. Now a fellow, for instance, who would call a napkin a serviette would be rather a bounder, in my opinion. Fancy—a serviette! My aunt!"

"Those distinctions are also understood in America," said Mrs. Hightower with some irritation. "All the good English blood is not on the other side of the water."

"By no means," the lieutenant agreed. "I've been told that most of the American families run

back to the Conquest." He had an air of extreme deference.

Celia tried in vain to turn the stream; pride in her genealogy was one of Mrs. Hightower's weaknesses.

"My family is descended from Cnut," she said.

"Ah," said the lieutenant, "I should have fancied it Florentine, or Venetian, perhaps; the Italian women are so charming."

She fixed him with a severe glance. "If that remark is intended as a compliment, I should advise you to make it to a younger woman," she said.

Wrexham returned the glance unperturbed. "I seldom make compliments to women; I find them dangerous. One is so often misunderstood," he remarked.

The air of audacity about him brought very vividly to Mrs. Hightower's mind the captain in the Coldstream Guards—in spite of the small mustache. "Not worth picking up with the tongs," she reflected, and Wrexham read her thoughts with some accuracy. She stimulated him, though, like a breath of his familiar atmosphere. He was accustomed to support disapproval without concern, and he felt himself in good form.

"I don't believe I am in danger of misunderstanding you," said Mrs. Hightower pointedly.

"I fancy not," he said truly. "It's remarkably pleasant not to have to assume an appearance of virtue."

"I thought you were holding up the Guards as examples for our young men to follow," said Celia.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We don't bang off pistols, and curse people and knock them down, and if we did we shouldn't be excused because we were drunk. We should be disgraced, that's what we should be. Of course, once or twice I've been a bit—well, a bit muddled," he went on. "One night I was coming home in my car, and I ran bang into a Bobby—two of them. They took me up, you know, and really it was deuced disagreeable, but I told them I was an officer in the Guards, and I said to them: 'I can't stay here, I should be in an awful mess if I did.' So they let me go. Oh, no, a gentleman isn't supposed to go about drunk in London. The difference is in public opinion, and that's what tells in those matters."

"You can't mean that we are worse here than the people in London," said Celia, unconvinced.

"You are cruder in your vices here," he replied.

She looked at him with appreciation; he could discriminate at times with a good deal of nicety.

Mrs. Hightower also recognized that the lieutenant was worthy of consideration, at least. "Where is your family estate?" she asked, sure that there was one behind this assured young Guardsman.

"In Wales. We've let it, though, since my father died. A tradesman's got it—made his money in bacon—but I'm deuced glad the thing's off my hands. You know what free trade has done for the English landlord."

"I dare say the tenants are better off in the hands of the bacon man," Mrs. Hightower remarked.

"Probably they would be, but he has only the park. I look after the tenants, and a pretty penny they cost me, too. Just last summer I had to pay thirty quid to put a roof on a farmhouse. My word! Think what I could have done with that money in London. I never saw the roof, and I don't remember the farmhouse, yet here I have to pay for the darned thing out of my rents."

"But you have to take care of your tenants," said Celia.

"Not at all. The idea is that they should take care of me. You Americans read these things in books—Molly Hunter has been talking the same sort of bunk to me."

It was a mistake to speak of Molly; he realized that the moment her name was off his tongue. Celia was a person one might speak confidentially with—not so, Mrs. Hightower. She was one of those women who live suspecting love-affairs. He felt assured of that, but for one unfortunate moment he had forgotten her.

She interposed an immediate question: "Who is Molly Hunter?"

Celia was about to say: "Don't you remember the girl you met yesterday?" but she knew very well that Mrs. Hightower did remember, so she left the lieutenant to explain his reference.

"She is a girl who lives up the road," he said, with apparent unconcern.

"Pretty?" asked Mrs. Hightower.

"Quite so."

"That's always the first thing you want to know about a girl," Celia commented.

"I look at 'em from the masculine standpoint," said her aunt.

Wrexham smiled. "Quite so," he said again.

"So Molly answers the first requirement," Mrs. Hightower said.

"It's about the only requirement one need make of a casual and passing acquaintance," the lieutenant remarked, and his manner was so exceedingly frigid that it convinced Mrs. Hightower that his interest in Molly, if passing, was, for the time, at least, far from casual.

"She must have been the girl I met yesterday," she said. "I remember now, she spoke of you."

"Ah," said the lieutenant. There was an eagerness in his voice that he could not conceal. He heard it himself, and laughed. "I suppose I may as well tell you. I'm rather touched in that direction," he said, for he had always the wit to see when frankness was his best defense against curiosity.

"I'll tell you what she said then," Mrs. Hightower agreed. "She told me I reminded her of you."

The lieutenant seemed momentarily disconcerted.

"Whether she meant in appearance or manner, I can't tell you," Mrs. Hightower remarked.

"In both, I hope," he said with a bow.

"She seems to have considerable self-possession for a country girl. I should say she was not a young woman to be carried off her feet," the lady commented.

"Quite so," said the lieutenant. He understood, though, that Mrs. Hightower was taking advantage of the opportunity to lower his conceit, and he was not at all sure that Molly had expressed indifference to his charms.

"A nasty-tempered cat," he remarked to himself as he lit his cigarette outside upon the porch.

Yet the evening in Mrs. Hightower's society had exhilarated him; such women were component parts of his world. Celia he found agreeable and sympathetic, Molly absorbed his attention, but the seasoned worldliness of Mrs. Hightower was vivifying after residence in the wilds. Even the interest of Mrs. Hightower's society, however, centred in the fact that Molly had spoken to her of him. "Self-possessed, not apt to be swept off her feet," the dowager had said. He had found that to be true, yet he could not help believing that Molly must have revealed some interest in him, more than casual, or Mrs. Hightower would not have attempted so patently to convince him that she had not done so. He felt, on the whole, encouraged by the worthy lady's remarks, and in a very good humor, as he swung off down the walk that ran along the edge of the bluff.

Molly saw him pass her house in the moonlight. Why must she be always looking out for that modern, graceful figure as it came and went at odd hours across the open space that lay between the house and the river? She saw him, oftener than not, and many a night, as now, she lay awake and thought of

the lieutenant, though he did not deserve such consideration, and it was exceedingly unwise in her to give it. She sometimes wondered how she kept her poise with this young Englishman, who was growing so flatteringly ardent in his manner. Yet she did keep it, much to his own surprise. Her coolness quite maddened him at times.

"You have no more heart than a—" He hesitated, then drew inspiration from his surroundings, "than a fish," he finished. They were down on the wharf a day or two later, where they often sat.

"Don't fishes have hearts?" asked Molly curiously.

"Oh, I dare say they have some sort of pumper, just as you have, but gad, I shouldn't call it a heart. To be entirely frank, I believe that old mummified aunt of Miss Northrup's has set you against me."

"What does she know about you?" asked Molly.

"Nothing except what I told her myself," he declared.

Molly realized that, and the lieutenant knew that he had scored.

"No woman forces information from me, and, believe me, no man can," he said. "If I've a bad reputation on this side the water it's because I've spread it myself—because I don't choose to be under false colors."

"That is true," said Molly, and he saw in her eyes and heard in her voice the first serious approval that he had ever had given to him in his life—or the first that he could remember. Suddenly he was filled with regret that the reputation

he had taken no pains to conceal should be so little worthy of Molly's admiration. For a moment she seemed to him transcendently pure and lovely—a being before whom his past could scarcely be presented. Only for a moment. It was a strange sensation to Wrexham, that of unworthiness, and it passed.

Molly was not aware that she had aroused it. "Mrs. Hightower bases her opinion of you upon her knowledge of the Guards in general," she said.

A flash of temper shone in his face. "And I base my opinion of her upon my knowledge of old hags in general," he exclaimed.

Molly was not accustomed to hear ladies called hags, no matter of what age and temper they might be. "I like Mrs. Hightower," she said.

"Like her!" cried the lieutenant. "My word, I think a woman like that should be put up the chimney. Do you know what she told me? She said you said that she reminded you of me."

"She does, in her general air," said Molly.

"Well, her general air is not half bad; it's rather good, as a matter of fact."

"I think you are the most absolutely self-satisfied person I know," Molly exclaimed.

The lieutenant laughed. "One must keep cheerful," he said.

She looked at him with a half-wondering smile, and as he met her glance a quick change swept over his face. He felt again that strange sense of unworthiness.

"I wish I were a different sort of fellow," he said suddenly.

She heard the ring of sincerity in his tone—he had dropped his amusing little eccentricities of speech and manner. She knew that for the moment she had stirred in him an impulse toward the higher things, such as he had never known before. She was moved herself—this way might lie happiness for them both.

"Why do you want to be different?" she asked.

He gave a bitter little laugh. "Why? Because there's nothing in life for me as I am now."

"What do you want in life?" asked Molly.

"What does every man want?" he answered. There was a deep unhappiness in his voice and in his face.

Molly did not reply to that, and after a brief silence she moved away from him to the other side of the wharf. She sat there, looking out across the river, one arm thrown along the railing. The lieutenant watched her for a time, his face clouded. At last he lit a cigarette.

Molly herself did not seem very happy. He saw the look of sadness in her eyes as she turned to him when he moved again to her side.

"Gad," he said suddenly, "you care!"

"For what?" she asked. Her tone was remote, almost cold.

"You wish I were different."

"Possibly; but you aren't, so that's an end to it."

"But if I were?" he said insistently.

She liked him the better for not taking the hand that still lay upon the railing. She shook her head. "You are not, and never will be," she said quite low.

The lieutenant turned away; he walked across the wharf, then back again to Molly. "There's no use in my trying to promise things that I can't do," he said. "I know myself, and that's all there is to it."

"I'm not asking you to promise anything," said Molly coldly.

"Now, you are angry," he cried, "just because I've told you the truth. I've said to you what I've never said to any other woman in the world—no other woman has ever made me want to say it."

"Not even Edie Ingot?" She knew it was a mistake to speak of Edie, but the thought of her rankled in Molly's mind.

The lieutenant was taken aback for a moment, but when he spoke it was with a return to his usual manner, and she realized that she had given him a certain advantage over her by showing her resentment of Edie.

"Who told you about her?" he asked.

"I think you must have," said Molly, though she knew that he had not mentioned Edie to her in any but a casual manner.

"Very probably," said the lieutenant, but Molly understood from his tone that he knew she had been talking about him to Celia.

He laughed a little gayly, for his serious mood had

passed. "'My aunt,' Edie would say to me, 'aren't you getting a bit soft in the bean, Dicky?'" if I talked this way to her. She's a comfortable little trick; she takes a fellow as he is, and doesn't try to make him over."

"She must be a very cheering companion," said Molly coldly.

"Edie's all right," he answered, and there was a dogged note in his voice.

Edie was all right, in her way. But that was just it—"in her way." Something within him knew that it was not the most admirable way. However, her charms were very positive; remembrance of them came to him vividly. She was prettier than Molly—more sparkling, too. And yet, there was a certain elusive quality in Molly that held his fancy, held more than his fancy, it gripped his heart. For the first time in his career, emotionally speaking, he felt that he had a heart. Edie had never made him feel it; but Edie suited him much better than this girl. Undoubtedly. Edie was a woman of the world.

"Suppose we go in," said Molly, and she rose as she spoke.

"You are always getting away from me," he said in annoyance.

"Well, why not?" she asked.

"Oh, I know from your point of view I'm a poor stick."

"What are you from your own point of view?"

"Something rather worse." There was a hope-

less sound in his voice, that seemed to Molly infinitely touching.

"Why does it have to be so? Other people rise above their temptations, why can't you?" she asked appealingly.

"You don't know what you are talking about. You never had a temptation worthy of the name," he exclaimed.

"Oh, haven't I?" said Molly. In spite of her reserve, something odd in her manner caused the lieutenant to fancy that he was her great temptation. It was an intuitive understanding that brought him to that conclusion. At that moment he would have given a great deal to have been different, to have had a different past, and the power within him that would make a different future. He would be willing to be like Weldon. There might be some happiness for a man like Weldon. Why not for him, too? Not with Edie. Happiness is a thing that women like Edie cannot give. It is something pure, like the salt wind blowing up the river; something mysterious, like the soft light on the marshes; something lovely, like Molly herself, with that sweet look in her face. Wrexham had his moment of idealism and longing. Under its spell he could have promised anything she asked.

But Molly asked nothing more. Somehow, her belief in him wavered. Perhaps she felt his reliance upon her strength. The fear that his own estimate of himself was correct, came upon her with an oppression that she could scarcely bear. She must

get away from him; she could endure the strain of his magnetism no longer. She slipped by him, moving with the suddenness of decision.

She was forever treating him in that way; she had a tantalizing quality about her that made her interesting—more interesting than he had fancied a quiet sort of girl could be.

“Go on, I shan’t follow you,” he said with some irritation. He had fancied that she cared.

“‘Nobody asked you, sir, she said,’” she answered lightly, and left him to his reflections and his cigarette.

He watched her walk away, and when at last he turned there was a bit of white fluttering at his feet. He stooped and picked up Molly’s handkerchief. It was a very plain little cotton handkerchief, innocent of perfume. Edie’s were quite different, and she affected a scent that he had chosen for her, very delicate, very good form. Yet Wrexham looked with more sentiment at that little cotton square than he had ever bestowed upon the belongings of a woman.

“Nothing like her in England,” he said, and he kissed Molly’s handkerchief, though he laughed a little as he did so.

“Rather like a leading man in a popular show,” he thought with some sarcasm at his own expense.

But everybody has to be young once, and even a worldly young man, a lieutenant in the Irish Guards, may, at times, find himself unexpectedly sentimental.

CHAPTER XIII

MELINDA was sick again; Lizzie brought the news one morning with a request for a remedy of some description. Mrs. Hightower undertook the case at once, and prescribed out of hand.

Celia was a little uncertain as to the treatment. "I guess I'd better go and see her," she said with a sigh.

A visit to the negro settlement could not be lightly undertaken. It was more or less like a progress, with stops at several points where the proper civilities were interchanged.

"Nonsense. There's no need of seeing her. This medicine I'm sending will be all that's necessary."

"But I can't make out just what's the matter with her," Celia objected.

"Well, read what it says on the bottle; she could hardly miss having one or another of those ailments."

"You will take patent medicines," said Celia.

"Certainly I will. It keeps up my spirits to know I've got a sure cure. Melinda will be all right when she gets this; it's the worst tasting stuff on the market. Don't bother to go traipsing over there through the bushes."

Lizzie was more than satisfied with the large dark bottle which Mrs. Hightower produced, and the explicit directions with which it was presented. She

sent them to her mother at once by a messenger brought for the purpose.

Celia, however, was still uncertain, and later in the day, when the sun had dried the frost, she slipped away from her Aunt Maria and went up the back road to pass an intelligent, if unprofessional, opinion upon Melinda's case.

The settlement was patriarchal in its inception, though outsiders had crept in and built their cabins near by. The house of old Maum Nana and Daddy Tom, however, was its centre, and from it the children and the "grands," as they were called, had branched out in houses of their own, set at odd points upon the ancestral fields. Here and there another piece of woodland had been fenced in and cleared, so that the land about was considerable in extent. It was fertile, too, and well cultivated; there were fig trees and pear trees and tumbling grape arbors about each house, and always a patch of flowers at each door. It was well that the soil was productive, for a succession of mouths came on to be fed. Daughters and granddaughters, at work in the town, sent back all impediments in the way of children, so that the stream of life was kept renewed to the point of overflowing.

Celia was seen from a distance, and was met by Lily and Isaiah upon the road.

"Is that Viola?" she asked in friendly greeting.

Lily said nothing, but toed the dust in embarrassment.

Isaiah slunk behind her, his trousers, long and

flowing, showed beneath her scant skirt. "Him name Lily," he volunteered.

"Oh, yes, Lily," said Celia, "and you are Jeremiah?"

"No ma'am, Isaiah."

"That's so," Celia exclaimed, and then she looked at them severely. "Have you children forgotten your manners?" she asked. "How did your mother tell you to do when you speak to a lady?"

Lily, hanging her head, took hold of her skirts and bobbed a curtsy, and Isaiah pulled off his cap and scraped his foot.

"That's better," said Celia. "How is your mother feeling?"

"Ma sick in de bed," said Lily.

"Did she take the medicine Lizzie sent her?"

"She done take 'mos' half," Isaiah replied.

"'Most half, already? She'll kill herself. Did it make her feel any better?"

"No, ma'am. She say look like it ain't got much stren'th een it. She say dat why she hab to take 'em so steady."

The children dropped behind, and followed Celia down the path that led across the fields to their house. It led more directly to their grandmother's house, Melinda lived on a branch line, and as this was a visit of importance Celia went first to Maum Nana's.

The old woman came out to greet her. She was small, compactly built, and erect, with a clear, but withered brown skin; there was a straight look in

her eyes, and firm lines about her mouth. She was not a negro of the ordinary type, and standing in her doorway, with her clean apron, her head handkerchief, and her brass earrings, she made a picturesque bit, worthy of admiration.

Celia took her hand in a cordial clasp; Maum Nana's grip was as strong as in the days of her youth. It was the hand of a woman who directed activities and wills; the old negress seemed like the chieftainess of her tribe. In her veins, indeed, there may have run the blood of kings—of kings who ruled through fitness to command. She made a curtsy as she shook Celia's hand.

"I'm glad to see you so well, Maum Nana," Celia said.

"By de will ob de Lord de ole 'oman is up," Maum Nana replied. "Git a cheer for Miss Celia," she called, as she conducted the visitor to her fireside.

"How is Daddy Tom?" asked Celia.

"I done sen' for him to see you; he out in de fiel' right now."

"The old people are worth more than the young ones," Celia said. It was one of her stock remarks, always well received.

"My kingdom!" said Maum Nana, and cast terrifying glances at the youth about her. "Miss Celia, dese chillun dey don' know nuttin' 'bout de worship ob de Lord. Me and Thomas, we wrastle wid 'em. Down on dese knees I say, 'Please, Lord!' I git up, an' I take de strap."

"I know you raise them right," said Celia.

“Wid de help ob de Lord, I tries,” Maum Nana answered. “But all ob dese here head ob chillun is my grands, an’ de ole ’oman ain’ ha’dly got stren’t h to hol’ out. Put a piece o’ wood on de fire, an’ shet dat door behin’ de young madam,” she said in a quick, commanding tone to the children who were standing about. “Look in de ya’d an’ git a fowl aig for Miss Celia. Tell your gran’pa come on an’ see de madam.”

“Gran’pa comin’ now,” said an observer from the door.

Daddy Tom was large and genial, with a shifting glance. It was clear that he too paid the respect due to Maum Nana’s powers.

“Praise de Lord, I see de young madam once mo’,” he remarked in greeting.

“No people like the old people,” said Celia.

“Jis so,” Daddy Tom agreed.

“It’s not always the swift ones who win the race,” said Celia, colloquializing her wisdom.

“Ain’t it de trut’!” he exclaimed.

“And the one that can laugh last is the best one,” she continued.

“Das right,” Daddy Tom remarked.

Celia shone on such occasions; she enjoyed sitting on the rickety bench before the fire, talking to the old couple, to the accompaniment of Daddy Tom’s loud agreement, and Maum Nana’s nodded approval. “Grands” of differing sexes and ages stood about and listened, while a black-and-white cat, very scrawny, eyed her from across the fireplace,

and a black-and-white dog, very thin, beat his tail from time to time upon the door.

The approach to Melinda's bedside was delayed considerably by the visit, and the medicine which Mrs. Hightower had sent was lowered in the brown bottle by another tablespoonful before Celia arrived. The "grands" in Maum Nana's house preceded the visitor across the yard into Melinda's apartment.

Melinda had an effulgent brass bed that almost filled the room in which it stood. The bed had not been paid for yet, but it was imposing, despite the fact. Celia sat in the parlor and conversed with the patient through the doorway. Melinda could scarcely be seen; she appeared merely as a bale of patchwork quilts upon the bed.

"Oh, I like to die las' night," she groaned, in answer to Celia's inquiries. "Oh, I holler, I holler all night."

"Doesn't that medicine help you?" asked Celia. Now that she had reached Melinda's side, she found that she could do little better than to fall back upon Mrs. Hightower's prescription.

"I gittin' it down now," said Melinda.

"Don't take any more right now; give it time," Celia cautioned.

"Dat what ma tell me, but ole people is so slow."

"Old people know the best, they've been here a long time," said Celia, and she produced a dollar as her contribution toward Melinda's recovery. It had a beneficial effect. Melinda sat up in the bed.

"Ain't I tell you dis is my people!" she cried.

"Get some tea and sugar with that," said Celia.

"See yer," said Melinda, "I gittin' one o' dem graphyphone. A w'ite gen'leman come by las' week, an' he say if I kin git two dollar an' a half, cash, he'll lemme hab 'em on de instalment."

Celia was annoyed. She had not meant to give Melinda a dollar, but the sight of an old photograph of herself, as a child, above the mantelpiece, by the side of a crayon of some African lady, presumably Melinda, had touched her heart. The photograph was scarcely observable, at first, against the background of illustrated weeklies with which the room was papered, but when Celia's eyes finally reached it she produced the money, because that was the only thing she happened to have with her to produce. She had meant to go to the store, but now the errand would have to wait for another day, so that Melinda's graphophone fund might be instituted. It was annoying in the extreme, and Melinda was not so very sick. Mrs. Hightower's method of treatment was far the most sensible, after all.

Celia was in rather an unamiable frame of mind as she started home, and it was a good thing for her that the walk was a long one, through the quiet winter woods, where the air was so refreshing, and the sights and sounds so soothing to the spirit. She stopped to rest at length beneath a pine tree, stretching herself flat upon the ground, and looking up to the distant blue where the turkey-buzzards sailed on steady wings. Suppose they were birdmen

launching their bolts upon a peaceful population! Her thoughts had flown across the sea, and she did not hear a footstep until it was almost upon her.

Weldon was not looking for ladies that morning, nor thinking about them either, for that matter. Celia's brown dress was inconspicuous against the pine straw, and a bare bush or two hid her very effectually, so that he was much startled when she suddenly sat up in front of him.

"Don't shoot," she said.

"I might have shot if I had been out for partridges," he answered.

"But don't call me a partridge—there's only one thing ever said about a partridge."

He laughed as he sat down beside her. "I like brown," he said, and he rubbed a bit of her soft wool skirt between his fingers.

"It's my color," said Celia.

"Possibly that's why I like it," he remarked. "I always like a woman in a brown dress."

"It's not a becoming color to everybody," she replied, and there was a little edge on her tone, much to Weldon's mystification. He did not pretend to understand all of Celia's intricacies.

"Where is Mrs. Hightower?" he asked.

"Amusing herself with Molly. She has taken a desperate fancy to Molly."

"Miss Hunter seems to be in demand," said Weldon.

"You mean by Mr. Wrexham, too, don't you?" she asked. "He makes me uneasy for Molly."

"She has too much sense," Weldon began, but Celia interrupted him.

"It's not a matter of sense."

"I suppose not," he said, and gazed into space. His mind was not occupying itself with Molly and Wrexham.

"Yet I can't help thinking there must be a lot of good in him, for I like him so much. Don't you?" asked Celia.

"Who? Oh, Wrexham," he answered, bringing his thought again to the subject in hand. "It seems to me Wrexham might be made over by a woman—one of the right kind."

"It would be hard on the woman."

"Crushing," said Weldon, "unless——"

Celia shook her head. "Nothing could help her."

"You have always underestimated the power of love," he said slowly.

"And you have always underestimated the exhausting friction of life. You are a sentimentalist, that's what you are," she declared.

"I don't look like one, and I don't act like one," he protested.

"You think and feel like one, and that's quite as bad."

"I submit that you don't know what I think and feel; you've taken precious little trouble to find out," said Weldon. There were rare moments when exasperation at Celia's indifference overcame his sense of justice.

She made no answer; she realized the statement

was true, and quite suddenly she realized, too, how little she deserved his admiration. Her life seemed so selfish, and so self-centred in the light of his power to give himself to an unrewarded devotion.

"You ought to go away, John," she said.

"What's the use? I went once to South America."

"Well, didn't you get some sort of distraction?"

"I suppose so," he admitted.

Celia looked at him keenly; she could not help wondering what the distraction had been. "There must be very pleasant social life in South America."

"In some places," he answered absently.

"The women are pretty, I dare say."

"Some of them are beautiful."

"I don't like that type much, though," said Celia.

"Oh, I don't know—luscious-looking," he remarked.

"You ought to go on some sort of northern expedition—polar things—you'd like that," she suggested.

"There's only one place for a man to go now, and that's France," said Weldon. "Of course I'm too old for the trenches, but I'm thinking—" He hesitated.

Celia turned to him with questioning surprise in her face. It had not occurred to her that he was thinking of anything but staying there in his tin house for her amusement. "What are you going to do?" she asked quickly.

"I don't know exactly yet, but there's plenty of engineering work I could have a hand in over there. I've written to Washington."

"You've written, and didn't even tell me a word about it?"

"There was nothing much to tell; it's still all in the air."

"But I didn't know you were even making up your mind."

"You made that up for me."

"You were rather disingenuous then, when I suggested your going away," she asserted.

"I said 'what's the use,' and there isn't any use, so far as you are concerned," he replied.

"Then what are you going away for? The government certainly wants you here, or it wouldn't have sent you."

"Oh, well, there's no object in my hanging around on this side, worrying you as I do."

"It's absurd to say you worry me; you needn't go to France on that account," she said decidedly.

"I know," he answered, "but it's always more or less of a strain to have a person asking for more than you can give."

"You don't ask," she said.

He put his hand over hers as it toyed with a bit of pine straw. "What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Not anything," said Celia, and she sighed. It was hard to be called upon for a sudden decision every time she followed a conversational impulse.

"You see?" said Weldon sadly. He dropped her hand as he spoke. "And even though I don't ask, you know what I want just the same."

Yes, she did know; she knew, besides, that he was the best man she had ever had the opportunity of marrying, and, viewing her life dispassionately, she wished she had married him. Why not make the decision now? Those things were always hard to do. Years ago she used to think of John Weldon as a sort of possibility through whom her life might find its solution. It would be such a wise solution, so entirely right, and just, and good. There was no mistake possible with him—not as far as she was concerned, anyway. How wild and free the woods seemed! How alluring the glimpse of the blue sky! She should have chosen an interior as the place of her surrender. However, such fantasies ill befit the great moments of life; the facts were all that she could desire them to be. Her best decisions were made upon impulse. She stopped considering the matter, and jumped off.

"I'll marry you, John, if you want me to," she said.

The unexpectedness of the proposition staggered him. "You mean you care—" he began slowly.

Celia interrupted him. "Don't go into all that," she begged. "Feeling is so baffling. I never know what I feel, but I do know I'd rather marry you than not, in the long run, and I never felt that way before."

Weldon looked at her and smiled; she thought him remarkably cool. "Is this a proposal?" he inquired.

"I suppose it is."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to do without me—on those terms."

"All right," said Celia. She knew it was foolish of her, but she could not help feeling a little annoyed at his manner. "At least, then, you needn't always feel aggrieved toward me hereafter," she said.

"I haven't felt aggrieved—that is, not often," he answered.

"Well, I have just as much right to feel hurt that you shouldn't have accepted my proposition," Celia continued.

"Do you feel so?" he asked. His glance drew hers to meet it, but she dropped her eyes after a moment's look into his face. Suddenly she was ashamed of her proposal, and of her own inadequacy before the demands of his nature.

"Do you know what I think?" said Weldon. "I think you owe me an apology for your suggestion."

"I know it, John," she said sincerely. She said it humbly, too, and he could not help feeling that she had never been nearer to caring for him than at that moment. Celia felt it too. If only John Weldon had had the dash that could carry her off her feet.

He lacked it, however; she remained, when that unexpected thrill had passed, quite as evenly poised as before. It was hardly fair to hold him responsible for his temperamental shortcomings. Yet, if he had dared, he might have won Celia that day.

How was he to know? He pondered over the

question long, half conscious that some opportunity had slipped by him unseized. He had once dared a little too much, and she had resented it. Of course, there was no way of finding out just what would prevail with her at different times. It was a matter of instinct, he supposed. Now a man like Wrexham would be apt never to make a mistake. He could almost wish he were like Wrexham. A man of that type might miss some of the practical successes of life, but he would know how to win the woman he loved. Weldon grew rather despondent over the matter. It would be just as well, he fancied, if he did go to France.

The idea of his going recurred to Celia later with some insistence. An engineer, a civilian engineer, would not be in any particular danger, she supposed. France would be as good a place for him to go as anywhere else. And yet—she knew John Weldon. He was the kind of man who never takes precautions about himself. If any shells were falling around promiscuously, nine chances out of ten, one of them would fall on him. She could stop his going, but that would be rather a desperate remedy; she was feeling too glad that she had kept her liberty to risk it once more. Why couldn't he content himself here, with the motor-boat and the coast survey? She quite forgot that she had counselled his going away.

Orion, the cat, was sharing her meditations, for noon, with him, was not his busiest hour. He sat by Celia's side and rubbed his head against her.

"You are more like a dog than any cat I ever saw," she told him.

It was not a kind remark to make to a cat, but Orion received it in good part. She stroked his rough fur, reflecting, as she did so, upon the more admirable canine qualities. Yet, her Aunt Maria had called Wrexham a dog, and the word had sounded unpleasant. It was strange what a difference there could be in animals—and in men.

Orion enjoyed the gentle stroking and began to purr. The sun was warm on Celia's front steps where they were established, but suddenly his expression grew alert, and his fur began to rise. Celia looked up—Mrs. Hightower was coming up the walk.

Mrs. Hightower disliked cats, and more than once she had made Orion aware of her prejudice. He darted away, with furtive glances at the enemy, his tail straight behind him, his body tense and crouched as he ran. He and Mrs. Hightower did not draw forth the best qualities in each other. She saw him disappearing, and she called out: "Scat!" in a loud, unpleasant tone.

"It's bad enough to be an old maid; I wouldn't take up with a cat," she remarked, as she took the rocker on the veranda.

"I like being an old maid, and I like cats," said Celia. Her own temper was uncertain that morning.

"Well, it's best to like what you can get in this world," said Mrs. Hightower.

Celia did not deign to make answer.

"How did you find the sick?" her aunt inquired.

"Who? Melinda? There's nothing much the matter with her."

"I could have told you that before you started out. What did you give her?"

"I thought the remedy you had sent was about the best thing, after all," Celia admitted.

"I knew it," said Mrs. Hightower with satisfaction. "Had she drained the bottle?"

"Not quite; I managed to stop her."

"It wouldn't have made any difference, that's the way all of 'em take medicine—pour down the whole thing, and then wait for effects. See anything of John Weldon back in the woods?" Mrs. Hightower asked unexpectedly.

"Yes, I met him."

"What's he doing to-day?"

"I don't know," Celia responded curtly.

Mrs. Hightower looked at her with comprehension. "I guess he wasn't doing much when you saw him," she remarked.

"We talked for a while," said Celia, realizing that her remarks had been rather brief. "His engine is broken to-day, so he can't go in the boat."

"Why don't you ask him to dinner?" her aunt inquired.

"I haven't anything much for dinner."

"Ask him to supper, then; you must have a good meal once a day."

Celia sighed; her housekeeping powers were somewhat taxed by Mrs. Hightower's requirements. She

missed Mrs. Lovell, who, if not imaginative in the matter of menus, was at least experienced.

"Well, I'll ask him to supper, if you want him," she answered.

"He's better than nothing," said her aunt. "Besides, we can play bridge with a dummy."

"John plays a dreadful game of bridge," said Celia.

"I don't care; I can beat him all the better," her aunt replied. "We might get Molly, though, and teach her."

"Don't teach Molly to play bridge," Celia exclaimed. "I like to think there is one person in the world who doesn't know how."

"She'll have to learn, if she's going out in the world," said Mrs. Hightower.

"There's no reason for her to go out in the world; she's much better off here."

"With her looks? You don't know what you are talking about," said Mrs. Hightower. "I'd like to dress that girl, Celia."

"You'd probably spoil her," said Celia. "She'll never be prettier than she is right now, in the clothes she fixes for herself."

Mrs. Hightower paid no attention to this remark. "I could dress Molly so that she could rub that Wrexham boy's nose in the dust," she declared.

"Do you think she would do it if she could?" asked Celia.

"There's no way of telling," said her aunt, "but I'd like her to have the chance, and she'll never get it in the clothes she wears, poor child."

"Clothes would have nothing to do with it," said Celia. "Mr. Wrexham has seen too many pretty and well-dressed women."

"Her looks will do. A woman doesn't need to be any prettier than Molly; they don't use their wits when they are," Mrs. Hightower asserted.

"You like Molly, don't you?" said Celia.

"Yes, I do. She can see there's somebody else in the world besides herself."

Celia smiled; it was not a vision that Mrs. Hightower often enjoyed.

"I ought to have a girl like that to go around with me, Celia." Mrs. Hightower spoke upon the impulse, but it was evident that the idea struck her forcefully. "The only trouble is, I'd probably quarrel with her," she said uncertainly.

"You'd be less apt to quarrel with Molly than with most," said Celia.

"That's so. It's worth considering," Mrs. Hightower agreed. "Who's that whistling?" she asked.

"It's Robert," said Celia. She knew his tunes; besides, the throb of the engine, which had been going on for some time, had suddenly ceased.

Robert never neglected his duties as engineer, and, as Christmas had caused a decided reduction in his savings, it was incumbent upon him to be diligent. He came around the corner of the house now, puffed to more than his normal size, for he had a fine whistle.

"Good mornin'," he said.

"Take off your cap," said Mrs. Hightower. He

did so, and the ladies returned his greeting. He came up and sat by Celia on the step, close enough for her to put an arm around him and for him to dig his elbows into her lap.

"Mr. Wrexham's mad," he announced. "He's cursin'."

"I'm sorry he will do that way," said Celia.

"That ain't nothin' for him. He couldn't get Molly to talk to him."

"Why wouldn't Molly talk to him?" Celia asked, with an interest she did not conceal.

Robert showed the possibility of social talent; he noted the subjects which commanded attention. "Molly was walkin' with her," he answered, pointing to Mrs. Hightower.

"Never point at ladies," Mrs. Hightower said.

"All right, um," Robert agreed, and continued his narrative. "He says the one day he was not goin' in the boat, why did she have to go walkin' around with a—" He hesitated, and it was clear that he was embarrassed by Mrs. Hightower's presence. He found that he could not report the lieutenant very accurately.

"With a what?" Mrs. Hightower asked in glee.

"With you," said Robert, and the ladies both laughed. He joined in rather feebly, for he was a little afraid of Mrs. Hightower, and the consciousness of what the lieutenant had called her was heavy upon him.

"Don't you repeat sassy remarks to me, Robert," said the imposing lady in the armchair.

"No, ma'am," said Robert with emphasis. "My mother don't let me say what Mr. Wrexham says, no how."

"Robert has very nice manners," Celia declared, and she patted his shoulders and drew him closer.

"He'll take that message for you, I guess," said Mrs. Hightower.

"What message?" Celia inquired.

"Didn't you say you were going to ask John Weldon here this evening?"

"I can go," said Robert willingly. He jumped down and stood in the path waiting.

"Tell Mr. Weldon Mrs. Hightower asks him to supper," Celia directed.

"Send the invitation yourself," said Mrs. Hightower.

"Oh, no. He'll be pleased to think you want him."

"No doubt he'll be overjoyed," the older lady remarked.

Robert was off. He pounded down the railroad track at top speed.

Mrs. Hightower went into the house, but Celia continued to sit in the sun. It was an occupation in which she had become proficient. She was still sitting there when Robert came back, gasping from his exertions.

"He says, 'Much obliged, all right,'" he announced between breaths.

"What did you tell him?" asked Celia.

"I told him you said Mis' Hightower said come to supper."

"Did he seem pleased?" Celia questioned.

"He didn't seem much pleased. He asked me which one asked him, and I told him you was lettin' Mis' Hightower have him so he says, all right, he's comin'."

Celia laughed. She felt that Robert had accomplished his mission very creditably, and she went into the house to get him a piece of candy.

CHAPTER XIV

WREXHAM settled with some satisfaction to an afternoon by Celia's fire. Mrs. Hightower had gone out; Molly had taken her for a drive in a very rickety old buggy. He bore her absence equably, for he felt a desire for Celia's sympathetic companionship. Celia, too, was glad that they were alone. She had not had a talk that amounted to anything with the lieutenant for some time, and she had been thinking of him with unusual interest of late.

"It's done me a great deal of good being in this country," he announced.

"You feel better?" she asked.

"Yes, I feel better, and then one gets a different view of life over here."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Rather more serious," he explained. "One begins to fancy there might be something in all the novels—sentiment, you know, with one's self as the hero, that sort of thing. I read them, and I say: 'It's very pretty, but it's all bunk!' One fancies that in London, but here one sees a moon now and again, and then, too, you've a remarkably fine climate for romance. There's something in nature, after all. We town chaps are apt to laugh at it for being overworked, but, believe me, nature is very pretty."

"Particularly when it's set off by a charming girl," Celia suggested.

"Quite so," he agreed.

"You don't mind the 'made-in-America' mark, then?"

"Not at all. It's rather a good send-off for a woman," he said. "South America, too, has some very charming women."

Celia was a trifle startled by this sudden veer to distant fields. The lieutenant was not averse to creating a diversion in her thought. He wanted to talk of Molly, yet he found it difficult to adopt the light, indifferent manner with which he usually treated the subject. It was far easier to discuss the South American women. Celia, as it happened, found them interesting. She was thinking of John Weldon, who also had expressed decided admiration for their style.

"You have been there?" she asked.

"Yes. I made the trip to Buenos Ayres once. There was a beautiful woman on the boat, and it was rather odd that I should have met her in London the night before we sailed. She was dining with a fellow at the Savoy, and he called me as I passed, and introduced me to the woman because we were to sail on the same boat next day. Of course I said, 'How remarkably pleasant,' though I knew nothing about her, and I thought it rather stupid of the fellow to saddle me with an acquaintance at the start. But, believe me, we had a good time on that trip. Wonderful thing, you know, those nights

in the tropical seas! Out of the world, not a care to worry you, not even your tailor, a soft breeze blowing, and phosphorus playing about the ship! She was a beautiful woman, too, and we went it rather strong."

"You were in love with her, I suppose," said Celia, feeling a trifle contemptuous of the lieutenant's impressionable nature.

She underestimated his powers of discrimination. "After a fashion, of course," he admitted. "One is obliged to feel a sort of infatuation under those conditions; but a woman like that is not—" He hesitated. "At any rate, she wouldn't have had any influence over me. It wouldn't have made a write-up, you know, for a novel."

"In other words, it wasn't the real thing," said Celia.

"Decidedly not."

"And how do you know the real thing?" she inquired. It was a question whose answer, however given, she always found interesting.

Wrexham stroked his mustache and looked into the fire. "It's more depressing," he said reflectively, "and the girl ought to be—well, one ought to want to marry the girl, think she'd make one rather happy—that sort of thing."

"Then the South American lady was not of that type?"

"Believe me, no. Besides, she'd a husband somewhere about, but she said she didn't care, she meant to cut loose and enjoy herself for the last time in

her life. You see, she'd a good reason for not expecting to live very long."

"What a ghastly situation," Celia could not help exclaiming.

"Probably it may seem so, but we didn't think about it much on that voyage."

"You mean you didn't."

"No, I didn't, nor she either, I fancy. She was a game sort." The lieutenant's eyes grew dreamy in remembrance. "I wonder if that woman is still living."

"Poor woman," said Celia.

He disliked the expression. "My word, one would never think of her that way. She was very beautiful, very charming, and one has to die at some time."

There was something almost fatalistic about Wrexham's views, something that accorded very well with the Oriental curve of his cheek and richness of his coloring.

"You don't look as though you were thinking of dying," said Celia.

"Personally, I am not," he answered; "but then, with this war going on, it's always quite possible. Of course I shall not go to France if I can help myself. I wouldn't last a week in the trenches, but I'm fit enough now for England, and I've a little influence that may get me a position on a staff in London. I wrote the War Office a fortnight ago."

"You are going back?" said Celia in surprise.

"Oh, I shall have to go, or keep out of England

altogether," he answered with a sigh. His response could not be called ardent. Undoubtedly, America had asserted its charm.

"I hope you won't have to go for some time," Celia told him. "We should miss you dreadfully—Molly and I."

"You are very kind," he said, in formal acknowledgment of her courtesy. Then he toyed a little uncertainly with the suggestion of Molly that Celia had thrown out for him. "No doubt Miss Hunter will think rather agreeably of me when I get to England," he said with some asperity.

"You believe absence really does make 'the heart grow fonder'?" Celia inquired.

"I can't say I do, from a personal point of view," he replied, "but sometimes a woman is that way, you know. And, my aunt, if I should get killed! She's the kind to adore a man who got killed."

"It wouldn't do you much good, though," Celia suggested.

"Unfortunately, no. That's the trouble. She expects too much of a man, Molly Hunter does," he exclaimed, and in his vehemence Celia read a good deal that neither Molly nor the lieutenant would have told her.

"How are you and Molly getting on?" she asked lightly.

"Rather slowly; she has not let me kiss her yet," he answered at once, with an eye upon Celia to see whether she was deceived by the flippancy of his assertion.

Celia had too much insight into the lieutenant's emotions to show either surprise or displeasure at his manner. Instead, she gave him the benefit of her serious opinion, which he was very glad to have, as she knew that he would be.

"Molly is not that kind of girl. She will never let you kiss her, unless——"

"Unless what?" There was no trace of flippancy about him as he asked the question.

"Unless you are serious," she told him.

"Serious? My word, of course I'm serious. I should very much like to kiss her, I assure you," he exclaimed.

Celia looked at him and shook her head.

"Oh, well, of course I'm not going to blow my brains out; but I told you I should be sorry I met her, and now I am." He got up and stood beside the mantelpiece, looking down upon Celia with a very perturbed air.

"Suppose we should marry," he said suddenly, and it was clear that he had presented the supposition to himself upon other occasions.

"I thought you didn't consider marriage as a possibility, except with a woman you wouldn't have to share any of your money with," Celia reminded him.

"Put it that way if you like," he replied haughtily. "I'm just straight enough to say what another fellow wouldn't mention—that's all there is to it. Don't you suppose I like all this sentimental bunk?" he demanded fiercely.

"I certainly had not thought of you as given over to sentiment," Celia replied.

"It's because I know the world," he cried. "And I know myself."

"A good many people know themselves, and can count upon a fair power to make sacrifices if necessary," said Celia.

"They have the advantage of me," he remarked coldly.

For all that, she got the impression that the lieutenant was suspecting himself of capabilities of which he had not dreamed. He was afraid to trust them, and seemed bent upon convincing himself of his own deficiencies. Yet he was tempted to believe in the existence of a self very different from that he had boasted of knowing.

"Suppose Molly Hunter and I should marry," he said again. The idea held him. "She'd hate me in just about a week, for I'm very selfish, and I have expensive tastes," he went on excitedly. "Besides, as things are now, my mother could make it deuced unpleasant for me in the matter of money."

Celia's half-mocking expression annoyed him.

"Oh, it's all very well to talk about sentiment," he said, "but I know life well enough to understand that there are other things to be considered." He paced the room as he spoke, and he looked a hero of romance to the life.

Celia had not expected to see him so stirred. "Well, what will you do when your orders from the War Office come?" she asked.

"Gad, there's only one sensible thing to do, and you know it as well as I," he answered.

She did know it, and yet she felt very doubtful whether the lieutenant would be able to hold himself to the sensible course, doubtful, too, whether the sensible course is always the best, doubtful, besides, as to Molly's frame of mind. Was it one to which sensible arguments would seem convincing?

The lieutenant answered her silent question. "She likes me, I know that, but it's against her judgment—and she's got such darned good judgment," he exclaimed in annoyance. "Of course, I know she's right; I'm not the sort of fellow one could depend upon—and yet," he hesitated, something almost touching in his aspect.

"And yet, you aren't as bad as you make yourself out to be," Celia said gently.

He knew that he could not agree with her. "One would not be quite justified in saying that," he answered. "But look at all the books one reads—there ought to be some sort of truth in them. A girl like Molly could do something with a man. Of course, I'm not saying she should, and I've too much sense to ask her to try it, but, at any rate, some people do it—or they say they do. I don't believe them myself." He slipped again into his indifferent manner.

"I dare say you are right," said Celia, falling in with his humor after a moment's pause. "Anyway, if you do go to London, you'll see Edie," she suggested.

He did not respond to that stimulus. "Edie's a good sort," he said without enthusiasm.

"Have you forgotten her already?" Celia asked.

"One doesn't forget Edie," he answered. "She's the kind of woman I can understand. She doesn't make me feel so darned peculiar, either," he added, with sudden resentment in his tone.

"There's nothing peculiar about Molly?" said Celia.

"That's all you know about it," he exclaimed contemptuously. "She's got some sort of influence, that girl has."

"A good one?"

"Of course it's good—it's darned good—and a fellow feels he's not fit to touch her." He was walking the floor again, and his manner implied that he held Celia directly responsible for the difficulties that Molly presented.

She was amused, yet she looked at him with understanding, and with very real sympathy for him in the struggle he was going through. It was all so new to him, so unsuspected, these longings of the soul that Molly had revealed.

Suddenly another grievance against her came to his mind. "I scarcely ever see her," he exclaimed. "She's always sewing, or cooking, or playing on her tin box. And if she does come out, gad, there are always a half-dozen children tagging on to her. Edie, now, I saw whenever I wanted to. I knew her hours, and I went in and out as I pleased. That was in the heart of London, mind you, and here, in

this hole, Molly Hunter keeps me on the jump all the time to find her."

Celia laughed; he did look exceedingly exasperated. "She took Aunt Maria for a drive this afternoon," she said.

The lieutenant shrugged his shoulders expressively. Certainly he would not have taken Mrs. Hightower for a drive.

Molly was enjoying herself very well. She felt the exalted lady's approval, and responded to it with little graces of manner and speech that became her. There was more than the consciousness of Mrs. Hightower's approval, however, that gave a certain vividness to Molly's face and an intensity of tone to her whole personality. It was as though some summer sun had touched her nature and drawn it forth in flower. Sometimes doubts assailed her—doubts of herself, graver doubts of the lieutenant. Yet Molly's knowledge of the world was only such as a girl so raised might have by instinct. She was, besides, accustomed to trust herself, in spite of her moments of uncertainty. She was sure she would make a wise choice, and almost as sure, that Wrexham was not so different from other men who fall in love with girls, though they don't expect to do so. She knew that she attracted him, and she did not choose to know just how strong his hold was upon her imagination. She put it that way—upon her imagination.

Of course the knowledge of Edie's existence remained with her, but, somehow, it had lost much of

its restraining power. Certain it is that her thoughts occupied themselves with the lieutenant, even during those hours of household duties of whose claims upon her time he was so resentful. There was an undercurrent of excitement and expectancy in the atmosphere that made life absorbing.

Mrs. Hightower looked at her admiringly. "It's good to be young," she said.

"You'll always be young," said Molly.

"It takes too much discernment to see my youth," the older lady replied. "However, I might have more chance if I had somebody to play up to. Celia might as well be my grandmother. Think she's going to marry John Weldon?" she inquired suddenly.

"Oh, I hope not," said Molly. "I like Mr. Weldon, but it's so much nicer for her not to be married."

"Fiddlesticks!" Mrs. Hightower exclaimed. "That's where you don't understand the world. A woman is expected to get married—or take up some calling, which is worse."

"I'll have to get married, then, for I don't know any sort of calling I could take up," said Molly. "I suppose, though, I might learn to be a nurse."

"Break stones before you do that, or be a companion," Mrs. Hightower advised. "How would you like to be a companion, anyway?" she asked suddenly.

There was such evident intention in the tone that Molly knew at once what was meant. She was greatly surprised by the offer.

Mrs. Hightower herself was surprised. She had not known that she was going to make it, but she was not at all sorry that she had done so, for she had been weighing the decision for several days. Molly's girlish prettiness was very pleasing to her, and she felt it would be well to keep that buoyancy and youth near her. Besides this, the knowledge of the lieutenant in the background lent a touch of spice to the situation. She would carry off Molly bodily, and he would have to pursue. She knew those Guardsmen—the necessity to pursue was the one charm that they could not resist.

"Come with me and see the world," she urged.

Molly gasped at sight of this unexpected gateway in the wall that surrounded her life. Yet, it was a pleasant life, and at present it held Lieutenant Wrexham. She tried not to think of that last as a reason that could possibly weigh with her, but she knew very well, in a sort of subconscious way, that that was the only thing that counted. She was ashamed of herself.

"Mother needs me," she began.

"Nonsense; she'll be glad to have you get out and see something."

"But I haven't the proper clothes," said Molly.

"Well, you'll have to get 'em. I'd like to dress you, Molly."

"Oh, I couldn't let you do that."

"Then you'll do it yourself, out of your salary."

A salary and clothes! Molly had not thought of all these possibilities. If it were not for the lieu-

tenant! She looked ahead of her down the road—woods on either side, in the fading light of a winter afternoon.

Mrs. Hightower attacked the situation boldly. "You ought to make a good marriage, Molly," she said; "something better than a broken-down lieutenant of uncertain reputation."

"What do you know about his reputation?" Molly asked quickly.

"Absolutely nothing. That's what I say—it's uncertain," Mrs. Hightower replied, and she smiled at Molly, who perceived the trap into which she had walked. She could have shaken herself for betraying such sudden and serious interest in Wrexham.

"I'm not thinking of marrying anybody just now," she asserted, with as light an air as she could command.

"You'll have to think about it soon or your chances will be gone," said Mrs. Hightower. "Come with me and look about you. I rather fancy bringing out a girl with so good a back."

Molly gathered the reins in one hand and slipped the other into Mrs. Hightower's as they were folded before her. "I don't know what makes you so kind to me," she said.

"I like you," answered Mrs. Hightower, and she pinched the slim fingers in a way that was as near a caress as she permitted herself. There was nothing saccharine about Mrs. Hightower. "Are you coming?" she asked.

Molly shook her head slowly. "I can't," she answered.

"You could if you wanted to. Don't be foolish, Molly."

"I know it's a great opportunity that I'm declining," said the girl, but there was no regret in her voice.

"That's not what I meant by being foolish, though this chance wouldn't come to one girl in a thousand."

Molly glanced around, at Mrs. Hightower's severe tone. "You mean, 'look out for Guardsmen of uncertain reputation,'" she said.

"And doubtful intentions," the older lady added at once.

"It would be much safer for you to come with me."

"An inglorious retreat?" said Molly.

"Call it a strategic move," Mrs. Hightower suggested.

Molly laughed, but she could not see it that way. The invitation had disturbed her more than she liked to admit. A few weeks before, it would have seemed like the realization of a dream. Now, she did not even consider its acceptance. And all because of the lieutenant; she was too honest not to understand the reason for her decision. No wonder Mrs. Hightower counselled her not to be foolish. She could not have believed herself so dominated by his charm.

"You wouldn't be away from here two days before he came after you," said Mrs. Hightower.

"Who?" asked Molly.

The lady expressed her exasperation. "Now see here, Molly," she said, "don't make the mistake of thinking me feeble-minded because I'm stiff in the joints."

Molly laughed and paid Mrs. Hightower the compliment of frankness. "Mr. Wrexham is not really in love with me," she said.

"Well, he's not capable of being really in love with anybody," the other observed, "but some of the substitutes for the emotion can produce spectacular effects."

Molly remembered that remark; she took it home with her. She almost took Wrexham himself, too, for when they got back to Celia's cottage he ran out to assist Mrs. Hightower to alight. Celia called to Molly to give the lieutenant a lift down the road.

"He doesn't want one," said Molly.

"Oh, but he does. It's time for him to go," Celia answered.

"Many thanks," said the lieutenant, and "Good afternoon!" He made his customary bows to Celia and Mrs. Hightower, and then turned with a question to Molly.

"May I?" He mounted to Mrs. Hightower's seat before he was answered.

The ladies watched the two young people drive away with interest.

"He's a great deal nicer man than you think," Celia asserted.

"You are a sentimentalist," Mrs. Hightower replied.

Celia smiled. That was what she had accused John Weldon of being. Things are comparative always; by the side of her Aunt Maria she probably was a sentimentalist. It would be well for Molly to be under the more severe regimen, she thought.

Molly was trying her very best to retain the influence of Mrs. Hightower's cynicism, but the nearness of the lieutenant made it hard to concentrate upon such ideas. She found herself prone to think of love and happiness, without bothering her head about suspicions.

"You're remarkably quiet to-day," he said.

"I've been talking a good deal to Mrs. Hightower," she explained.

"Rather hard luck for me," he remarked. "The old cat wants to set you against me if she can."

"Why doesn't she like you?" Molly asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "She's seen too many like me, I dare say."

"All the Guardsmen are not exactly alike, though, are they?" she asked. There was an appeal in her voice that moved the lieutenant strangely.

"We have about the same ideals," he answered.

"That is, in London."

"Do your ideals change according to the locality?"

"Sometimes a woman changes them for one of us," he said.

"But she might be a London woman."

"She's not apt to be—not the kind we see in London, at any rate."

He, too, grew taciturn after that, and they drove along in silence for some time. Silence is dangerous when two people are intensely conscious of each other. The sunset sky was fading ahead, the faintly purple mistiness was deepening in the woods. The old horse hung his head and slowed down to a meditative walk; the harness was tied up with bits of rope, and the buggy was dilapidated. It would be safe to say that the lieutenant had never been for a drive in similar style before, but he was not thinking about that, he was thinking of Molly, and of how lucky it was that he was at Miss Northrup's just as she drove up.

He tried to fix his mind upon all the wise remarks that he had made to Celia. Of course, it would be foolish beyond words to ask Molly to marry him. His mother would make herself extremely unpleasant about it, and there would be nothing but his own money, which always had to be eked out with debts, as matters stood. A man has to think of these things, a man can't dash ahead, bang on, and ask a girl, who's got no money, to marry him—no matter how he may feel. It was just as little his fault for not having enough for two as it was Molly's for being so deucedly poor. Why couldn't she have had a little money in her own right? There was no use expecting him to have it all.

Molly took out the whip and touched up the horse.

"Oh, I say, don't hurry," the lieutenant begged.

"Do you like to drive?" she asked.

"If you call this driving, I like it," he answered.

She turned and smiled at him, though she knew that his eyes were very near her face. It would have been much better had she not looked into them.

"Molly," said the lieutenant softly.

"Don't call me that," she found poise enough to say.

"Why not, when I love you," he answered. His voice was so deep, so vibrant!

Something almost choked Molly. She could listen to this no longer; it was hard to remember Mrs. Hightower's cautions. Edie Ingot, however, was of assistance. "I don't believe you—I don't trust you," said Molly, and she whipped up the horse again.

"Nobody does," he answered bitterly. "I don't care for the rest, but you are different. The only thing that's decent about me is the way I feel about you," he declared.

"Don't talk that way," she implored him. "I can't listen to you."

"Why not?"

"Because it's out of the question."

"What is?"

"My caring for you," she answered very low.

"If it were, you wouldn't be so upset about it," he told her.

Molly's temper flared at his audacity. "How dare you say that?" she demanded, and whipped the horse again,

"Don't belabor the beast," he said. "Let me out and I'll walk home."

"Just as you like," said Molly, turning the buggy.

Wrexham stepped down, but he stood between the wheels so she could not go on, and the horse improved the occasion by finding a mouthful of grass by the way.

"There's one thing I can't quite forgive you," said the lieutenant. "You listen to any old woman who has a hard word to throw at me. You think of every piece of worldly wisdom you've ever heard."

"Well, don't you?" said Molly.

"My aunt," he cried, "do you think if I were worldly I should be asking you to marry me?"

"Were you asking me to marry you?" she inquired.

"I can't afford it, but I intended to ask you just the same, if you hadn't dumped me out of your cart," he replied angrily.

Molly had a saving impulse to laugh. "What would it mean to you in round numbers?" she asked.

"It would mean halving twelve hundred quid a year, but gad, I don't care, Molly!" he cried.

"I do, though," she answered. She looked down at him with rather a lofty smile. "I don't know exactly how much a quid is, but I'm quite sure I couldn't get on on six hundred of them," she said.

"You refuse me, then, from a worldly standpoint, not a sentimental one," he remarked. "I didn't expect you to descend to it, but I realize that you are very wise in your decision."

"Will you be good enough to move," said Molly. It seemed strange that they should be so extremely angry with each other, all of a sudden.

The lieutenant fell back, and raised his hat; his manner was unimpeachable. Molly had to jerk her steed several times before she could get him away from the grass he was enjoying. Even then he needed prodding to give her an effective exit.

It had all come about so unexpectedly to them both. Molly knew that he was right, she had been wise in her decision. It is very trying, though, to have to be wise. If only she had not said that she didn't trust him. She had hurt him, and he had the right to feel bitter toward her. Oh, that she might go to him and deny her words. She looked back, but the lieutenant had cut into a by-path and left the road. She knew the little path; her heart flew with him as he went.

It must have made itself vaguely felt, for Wrexham's expression grew more tranquil as he strode along. "It's that old cat who's been after her," he remarked to himself, and the thought was soothing. He expected distrust from Mrs. Hightower, but from Molly—that was another matter. Molly had called his better nature into being; if she could not now believe in it, then the sweet, new world of which he had caught a glimpse was only the creation of his fancy. He decided again that it was only the old cat! Molly did well to attend to such counsel. Even the clever and experienced, though, can make mistakes.

"My aunt, I love her!" the lieutenant cried in the silence of the narrow pathway, with a sudden and a fresh conviction, even deeper than that which had come to him before.

Molly was turning in at her own gate, and the words of Mrs. Hightower came back to her—about some of the substitutes for the emotions which produce such spectacular effects. She wished she had never seen Mrs. Hightower. She would rather trust and be deceived than doubt a man who looked at her as the lieutenant had looked.

She drove into the stable-yard and called her brother to take the horse.

"Where did you go?" asked Tommy Hunter.

"I don't remember—somewhere up the road," said Molly vaguely, and she went away and left him to his early scorn of her sex.

CHAPTER XV

MOLLY and Wrexham found intercourse with each other embarrassing, though it held a fascination for them both. He took refuge in an excess of formality, she, in a manner that was laboriously casual. She kept close to the life-savers, besides, appearing with Robert or Jimmy or one of the young Hunters when she walked abroad. It was to be observed, however, that Molly was seen rather more often than usual. She seemed to devote less time to indoor occupations, and much to playing croquet with the little boys on the lawn in front of her house.

Wrexham, too, seemed interested in croquet, but he never joined in the game, and even expressed himself unfavorably toward it. He watched the players, though, whenever during the day he happened to be ashore, which, oddly enough, was about the only time the game was carried on.

"Rather a stupid affair," he remarked one afternoon, as he was occupied with his cigarette on a bench by the side of the lawn.

"Can you play?" asked Molly.

"Oh, I fancy I could, if I ever got to the point of handling one of the hammers," he answered indifferently.

"No doubt," said Molly, with politely veiled sarcasm. She made one of her strong, well-aimed shots as she spoke.

"Two wickets!" cried Jimmy.

The little boys were getting tired of playing with Molly. She used to let them beat sometimes, but not now.

"She's as good as out, so me an' you can finish it," Robert announced with satisfaction.

"You can teach Mr. Wrexham; I've got to go in now," said Molly. She held out her mallet toward the lieutenant as she spoke, and the suggestion was greeted with acclaim by the boys.

Wrexham, however, had no intention of being taught croquet by Robert and Jimmy. He declined the mallet with firm courtesy, and silenced the voices of his would-be instructors with even greater firmness, if with less courtesy.

Such meetings are more tantalizing than agreeable. He found them so, and so did Molly, yet there was an interest about them which neither was anxious to forego. They had, though, an irritating effect upon the temper, of which Wrexham, at least, gave evidence. He became gloomy and morose, evidently absorbed in unhappy reflections.

Weldon, who was accustomed to the lieutenant's moods, felt that he was unusually preoccupied. "Anything wrong?" he asked one day.

"As far as I am concerned, not at all so. Indeed, everything is entirely right," the young man answered.

"I thought you seemed a trifle depressed," Weldon explained.

"It's when things are right that a fellow is most

apt to get depressed," the other broke out. "The matter of their being right, doesn't make things pleasant, you know. In fact, it's rather certain to be quite the opposite. It's been so in my life, believe me."

"But I should say you had had quite a prosperous time of it," Weldon commented.

"Oh, charming!" the lieutenant snapped out in reply.

"The contemplation of it seems to fill you with joy," said Weldon.

"My word, why shouldn't I look as I please? The rest of you people do. You are deucedly dull whenever it suits you, and no one asks for an explanation—it's just your customary appearance—but if I keep quiet for ten minutes, everybody seems to think I've lost a near relative. I'm not sure, though, that that would affect me unpleasantly, particularly if I were to come into a bit of money by the demise," he finished viciously.

"Excuse me, I shouldn't have spoken, only you seemed unlike yourself," Weldon said.

"Unlike myself!" cried the lieutenant. "People think I'm a buffoon, and, if I'm not playing up to the part they fancy I'm in need of medical attention. Why don't you discharge me? That should be the next thing. If I were really dependent upon this darned position I'd be shoved out of it."

"I'll set you ashore now, if you like," said Weldon.

"It's entirely as you please," Wrexham replied with dignity.

"Then we'll keep on," Weldon answered, "and 'Wait till the clouds roll by.'"

"You'll have to wait quite a while, if it's on my account," the lieutenant observed.

"Take your time," said Weldon, "but see just now if you can put your mind on that rattle in the engine."

"If I were a nigger that's all you'd ask of me—to oil up that junk, and get the anchor up and down," Wrexham cried. "You'd never ask him what he had on his chest."

"Well, I haven't asked you, so cut out the grouch."

Weldon spoke quite forcefully, and the lieutenant turned to him with haughtiness. "If it's a matter of master and servant, our relations end," he said.

The older man looked him over quietly. He liked young Wrexham, he liked his grand manner. "Will you kindly tell me what we are quarrelling about?" he asked.

"That seems to be your own exclusive knowledge," the lieutenant answered.

"It's more your exclusive manner," said Weldon. "Are you going to attend to the engine, or shall I?"

"Suppose you do," Wrexham said. "I'll take the wheel."

"I've a preference for the wheel myself," Weldon replied, at which his assistant shrugged his shoulders, and repaired to the other end of the ship.

The lieutenant had some knack in the manage-

ment of an engine, and its exercise diverted the current of his thoughts.

"I've a beastly temper, you know," he volunteered, after the difficulty had been adjusted.

"I have myself," said Weldon.

"But you've got nothing to bring it out," the lieutenant exclaimed. "You lead your little jog-trot life. Everybody approves of you, and you can make yourself do anything you want. There's no merit for you in holding your temper."

"See here," said Weldon, "it won't be held much longer if we continue this conversation. Give me your opinion about a little social matter," he said, with a sudden change of subject. "I want to do something or other to entertain Mrs. Hightower."

The name had an unfortunate effect upon Wrexham. "Entertain Mrs. Hightower! She entertains herself at everybody else's expense. Believe me, I hate that woman."

"Oh, you mustn't mind her. She and I get on very nicely together," Weldon assured him.

"Because she plays into your hands," the lieutenant answered quickly.

"In what way?"

"Gad!" said Wrexham, and he raised his eyes in wonder at Weldon's lack of understanding. "If I should tell you, you'd probably try to knock me out of the boat," he said.

"No, I shan't. Just what do you mean?"

"I mean she wants you to marry her niece,"

the lieutenant answered promptly. There was an amused look in his eyes as he watched the older man.

Weldon's face grew dark. "I'll thank you not to make remarks that put Miss Northrup in an undignified light," he said.

"Miss Northrup has nothing to do with it; she'll probably suit her own preferences. I'm talking about the old woman," the lieutenant replied.

"You've got an exceedingly unpleasant manner in speaking of ladies," said Weldon heatedly.

Wrexham smiled; he saw that Weldon's temper was not always subject to control. "My manner, in this instance, is the result of experience," he explained. "No doubt, though, the lady is very worthy. What kind of party are you going to have for her out in your tin house?"

"I thought something of an oyster-roast," said Weldon.

"Pretty good. Have it at night—big blaze in the woods, that sort of thing."

The lieutenant had an eye for dramatic effect always. The suggestion of the party put him in a good humor. He knew that he would see Molly, too, under conditions that would be agreeable.

"I don't know about a night affair," Weldon said uncertainly. "Mrs. Hightower might not care for the woods at night."

"Then let her stay at home," Wrexham answered promptly.

"That wouldn't do," said Weldon. "Of course,

it would be more unusual at night, but I'm not sure that Mrs. Hightower——"

The lieutenant interrupted him. "Don't worry about her. Her kind loves the night; she'll probably roll in on a broomstick."

"You think she'd grace one?"

"I think she'd sit it with a remarkably firm seat."

Weldon laughed, but he was surprised to find later how correct the young man was about Mrs. Hightower—concerning her tastes, at least, if not her skill in riding a broomstick.

Weldon was a trifle apologetic when he mentioned the hour he had selected. "I wouldn't have put it at night except that I thought everything would be more picturesque," he explained.

"What's the matter with the night?" Mrs. Hightower demanded. "Is Molly rheumatic?"

"I thought maybe you—" Weldon began.

"I am, but I never mention it," she answered. "I love the night; I've always thought that the day doesn't begin well until the sun goes down."

Mrs. Hightower was very much pleased by the entertainment in her honor, and was in high good humor when Weldon came to escort her to his camp. Molly and Celia walked with Wrexham, and, as the procession moved off, Orion the cat came out of the bushes and fell in behind. He held his tail straight in the air and he measured his steps so as to keep his distance, but it was clear that he had connected himself with the expedition.

Mrs. Hightower saw him first. She turned to

Speak to Celia, and discovered Orion in the rear. "There's that cat. Scat!" she said as usual.

Orion did not run, but he stopped and looked inquiringly at Celia.

"Don't be mean to him, he's going to the party," she begged, and went back to his support.

"There are to be no cats at my party," her aunt said decidedly.

"Only the one it's given to," Wrexham remarked very low to Molly, who turned away from him with an indifferent air, annoyed at the expression.

"If you are going to be cold to me, I shall not go to the darned oyster-baking," he said, when they had all got under way again.

"I don't intend to spoil every one's evening," said Molly.

"That's just it," he replied with satisfaction. "You'll have to be as decent as you can to me."

"Why shouldn't I be decent to you?" she asked.

"I'm sure I don't know, but I rather thought from your manner you were treasuring up against me that bit of crazy folly I suggested that afternoon you gave me the lift down the road."

"Oh, no, that was quite excusable," said Molly.

A flash of anger showed in the lieutenant's face. "Make sport of it all you like."

"Folly is a good reason for making sport," she remarked coolly.

"You know it wasn't folly," he said quickly.

"Not for me. I dare say it would be for you, though—you're right there."

She made no answer, and he turned to her inquiringly. "I said you were right there," he told her again.

"Think so?" said Molly, and she looked at him with a smile that was meant to be self-possessed but that missed its aim, in some odd way, and was wistful and tender.

"No, I don't," he answered at once, with an ardor that thrilled Molly alarmingly. She turned with an abrupt movement and waited for Celia, who was still conversing with the cat.

Orion had about decided to go no further. He had reached the confines of his usual range, and he could not but be suspicious of an enterprise that went so far afield. Celia urged him to come on, but he stood his ground, his front feet close together and neatly turned out. She left him with regret, and he watched the party until it was lost to view in the woods.

The sun had set, and night was falling rapidly, a winter night, with no buzz or whirl of insect life to break its silence. There was a steely sky above, and the wind had ceased with the turn of the tide. The army of pines, marshalled on either side of the way, opened before them as they advanced, and not far ahead was Weldon's camp-fire, blazing now as a beacon through the gloom.

Mrs. Hightower's spirits bounded with the leap of the flames; light and fire struck always a responsive chord in her nature.

"Sing something," she called out; she liked noise. Certainly the party stood in need of it; some protest must be made against the solemnity of the woods.

"Sing!" said Mrs. Hightower again. She understood social requirements, and knew that revelry implies sound.

Celia abetted her efforts, and struck up "The Good Ship Maria," in compliment to her aunt. Molly sang it too, with spirit. Mrs. Hightower knew neither the tune nor the words, but she joined in, catching on where she could, and managing to give an air of gayety to her performance, which was all the occasion required. Weldon had a satisfied feeling that his party was beginning well, though personally he could contribute no sound to swell the light chorus that rose in gallant defiance of the pines in their battle array.

The song was too American for Wrexham. He achieved an accompaniment of basso notes, however, for he shared Mrs. Hightower's understanding of the festive value of a lively noise. He felt his social obligations, and responded to them, with the European attitude of mind that is so distinctly agreeable. Later, he gave a solo, one of the vaudeville hits that he had taken over from his music-hall friend. His voice was not worth considering, but his manner and his intonations were clever. Moreover, there was something piquant in the irrelevancy of his staging. Molly felt herself under the spell of it all—the charm of the unfamiliar was palpable

about the lieutenant. He seemed, indeed, like a minstrel who had stopped by their wayside fire.

And such a fire it was—big knots of lightwood, burning with a flare that illumined the trees around them, and kept at bay the shadows of the night, that leaped so hungrily beyond. Were these, perhaps, the dogs of war encircling their woodland blaze? Who could tell? For a moment, at least, those burning logs seemed typical of the safety and happiness that America was learning to appreciate.

There was a chair for Mrs. Hightower, and she took it, as she took all arrangements for her comfort, quite as a matter of course. The others sat on rugs on the ground. She ruled the feast very effectively, and, when it was over, she held her audience with tales that sparkled with the experience of a vivid personality.

"I've been here a long time, John Weldon," she said at length.

"Why, it's early," he answered.

"I'm talking about the world, not the party," said Mrs. Hightower.

"Oh, the world," said Weldon. "You are of the kind that grace it."

He felt, as host, exceedingly expansive, for his party was a decided success, and he could see that Celia enjoyed the beauty of the fire and the night. His eyes held hers more than once, while Mrs. Hightower's amusing anecdotes ran their appointed course. Celia smiled contentedly, and once she

twisted a ring of pine straw and threw it at him. He tried it on, but it was too large. "Put it on your thumb," she whispered, and the story went on—"so said she, sang she, told she the tale."

Celia found her glance resting with pleasure upon Weldon. He seemed so suited to his environment; there was even a certain gracefulness about his strength, and the ease of his posture.

"Should you like this life?" he found the opportunity of asking.

She nodded. "With somebody to keep up the fire."

He nodded, too, in agreement, and sent her a look that made an unlimited proffer of his services as a tender of fires. She smiled, neither accepting nor declining his proposition, but turned her attention from him, and amused herself throwing chips into the blaze. She had a small, pliant figure, and she looked well, with her hands clasped about her knees and her feet turned up to the fire. They were pretty feet, well shod. Molly's feet were pretty, too, but she did not put them out in such a conspicuous manner, for her shoes, though weather-tight, were not an ornamental addition to her costume. The details of Celia's dress, however, were never insistent; they seemed but the expression of a personality harmonious and fine. Even the orange Tam O'Shanter that she wore was not an excrescence, but just the note of color that bespoke a bit of gayety in her nature. She might have been a pixy or an elf, throwing chips into the flames.

It was Molly's fancy that caught the magic suggestions of the night. Perhaps the fairy-stories of her childhood were clearer in her memory. Mrs. Hightower, with her sharp features and commanding glance, fitted well into the scene. Wrexham's name for her, hag, flashed into Molly's remembrance.

At least, the old woman must be a witch; certainly she held them in some sort of enchantment by her voice. Weldon and Molly, herself, were just plain people—he would have to be a wood-chopper, and she, a poor peasant girl. But wood-choppers have a natural affinity for elves, and peasant girls always marry princes who wander about in disguise.

It was a charmed circle, of that there could be no doubt, and Molly was quite unconscious of how she herself adorned it, her hair gleaming, and her soft color deepened in the flickering light of the flames. She felt Wrexham's presence in a vibrant sort of way, though he spoke to her seldom, and his glance was always veiled. He saw her though—he saw the delicacy and the sweetness of her face—and he forgot time and the rest of life as he looked at her, forgot even himself, with the perplexities his faults had created.

No one knew the hour, indeed, when Mrs. Hightower started them all for home, though it could not have been very late, for the starry Orion was still dominant in the sky. Wrexham went ahead with the lantern, Weldon escorted Mrs. Hightower, again Molly and Celia came behind.

"Hasn't it been beautiful?" they asked each of the other, and laughed at the identity of their expression. The lantern shed a feeble gleam, the woods closed in about them. Celia and Molly lowered their voices in sensible awe at the darkness, and the pervasive, mystic murmur of the night-wind in the pines. Even Mrs. Hightower's tone dropped to a lower key. Here the woods were overpowering; there was no longer the fire to hold their influence back. Each of the revellers was glad to get out of them, and on to the open bluff.

Celia's house was close at hand, and the party broke up there. Weldon took the lantern, and went back to the embers of his fire, and the lieutenant, well pleased with the duty that fell to his lot, promised safe-conduct to Molly under his protection. Never had the two felt so close to each other—no antagonism, no fears, the firelight and the magic of the evening had swept such things aside. They went on for a time without speaking, each preferring the sweet accord of silence.

"Don't stumble over the roots," the lieutenant cautioned.

"I know the path better than you do," Molly answered.

"Then lead me," he said quickly, and caught her hand.

Molly laughed, but she left her hand in his clasp. Her touch inflamed him, for it seemed to his fervid fancy that her pulse was beating with his own. What wonder, when the stream of love, so turbulent

and strong, was bearing them both upon its flood? There was an ecstasy about the moment, too rare for speech, too pure for passion. Just for a breath they rested upon the bosom of the tide. Then it overwhelmed them, and he drew her into his arms. The stars shone bright through the chill air, the flow of the river below the bluff cast a faint murmur to the wandering wind, the long moss swayed gently, the world lay still in the quiet of the night, and all of it was theirs.

Molly moved in his embrace, and he released her. It was only, though, to raise her face to his. She laughed into the eyes so close above hers, but somehow, she managed to elude him.

"You didn't mean that about not believing in me, did you?" he asked humbly.

"No," said Molly. How could she have meant it? How could she mean it now?

"I'm an awful rotter," he said. "I'm everything low except a bounder, but I love you, Molly."

It sounded to Molly almost like a vow, and certainly no more reverent tones had ever fallen from the lieutenant's lips. She trusted them, at any rate, and if she thought of Edie Ingot, it was merely with a pang of regret that Edie should ever have existed for him. There was no fear in Molly's heart, just then, of any other woman who had touched, or might touch his life.

"I say, couldn't you—" He hesitated.

"What?"

"Couldn't you say something of the same sort to me?" he begged.

"No," said Molly. "You'll have to guess what I think." She looked up at him shyly; he could just see the shadowed softness of her face. This time she could not evade him; perhaps she did not even try. He kissed her with a tenderness new in his experience.

Molly turned at last and ran away from him, half drunk with the rapture of that kiss. She wanted to breathe, to feel her own personality and his distinct and separate. The strange blending of their spirits frightened her. They stood and looked at each other across a space of darkness.

"You are so lovely," Wrexham said.

"You can't see me," said Molly.

"I know," he answered. "It almost drove me mad to look at you to-night."

"But I'm not lovely, it's only that you think so," she told him. She could see the grace of his figure through the gloom; she knew every point of beauty in his own face, and she, too, did not need the light to be conscious of his charm. "That's not why you fell in love with me, is it?" she asked.

"My aunt, no! It's because you're so good."

"I'm sure it couldn't have been that," said Molly.

"Then what was it?" he demanded.

"Maybe it was because I wanted you to," she answered.

"You took an uncommonly strange way of showing it," he exclaimed.

He tried to kiss her again, but she would not let him. Molly touched the emotions delicately; she felt that they were not to be worn to tatters.

"You are the coldest woman I have ever known," he cried in exasperation.

"You've known so many," said Molly sadly.

He echoed the sadness with a deeper note of regret. "I wish I had never seen a woman until I saw you. I've never loved any of them, at any rate; I know that now."

Molly's heart beat hard with joy, for she believed him, and would do so, no matter what the worldly wise might say.

"You are the first man I have ever cared about," she told him.

He caught her hand and held it to his lips. "You see, you're the first one I've ever seen," she went on, and there was the suggestion of mockery in her voice.

"Gad, I wish you'd seen a regiment of fellows—worthless fellows," he cried.

"I like worthless ones," she assured him.

"Then I wish you had known a parson or two, and a half-dozen curates, just so as you might be sure."

"I'm sure," said Molly, and she slipped away from him and ran up her own front steps, for, in spite of their preoccupation, they had steered a pretty straight course.

"You're not going to leave me that way," he cried, and he took the steps behind her at two bounds.

"Good night," said Molly gayly. She shut the door and left him outside. She stood within, breathing rather hard; she was listening, too, for his step. He still waited upon the veranda. Softly she turned the knob and put her face to the crack. "Good night—dear," she whispered.

"Gad, you darling!" he cried, with deep conviction.

Molly heard him, but she turned the key with decision, and blew out the light that had been left to await her coming.

She groped her way up-stairs in the dark, and looked cautiously from her window—nothing but the sky, dark and gemmed, and below, the open stretch of lawn, reaching to the edge of the bluff. No, there was a dark form by the gate, and suddenly the gleam of a match—the lieutenant was lighting a cigarette. She saw his face, bent for a moment above the flame, and the charm that he held for her seemed too poignant for reality. The long familiar setting of her girlish life gave no place for this—this was part of a dream, a story, a bit of the enchantment that had encircled the fire in the woods.

Wrexham flicked out the match, and went back by the way they had come together. Molly could see him no longer from her window. What he left to her vision had been there always, so beautiful, so familiar, yet it ceased to satisfy. She did not even see the river and the stars.

The lieutenant had lighted his cigarette from force of habit; he smoked it until it burned his lip.

"My aunt, I've turned into a darned imbecile," he said with a laugh. It was a happy laugh. He knew there were difficulties in his way, but he would not think of them then.

"I shall have the deuce to pay later, but she's worth it," he said, and he stopped upon his way. Just here he had kissed her! The breeze seemed to bring him once more the sweet freshness of her face.

CHAPTER XVI

"WE'D better get married right away, and then nobody can interfere with us," said Wrexham. He had taken a day off, much to Weldon's annoyance, and he was spending it with Molly.

No fireside was open to them, for firesides are apt to be populous, and they wanted to be to themselves. The day was cold, though, and blustering. They rounded the point to a place where the sweep of the wind was not so strong, and they sat at the edge of the marsh beneath the bluff. Dried marsh-grass marked the water-line at their feet, and there was a little bit of hard beach-sand, strewn with broken shell from a crumbling tabby wall.

"Who's going to interfere?" asked Molly.

"Your people, I dare say, if they have any sense," he answered with a smile.

"I'm a fair sample of my people, and I haven't any," she said.

"You've a darned sight too much," he answered. "It almost made you give me the frozen mitt."

Molly said nothing to that; she knew some people would think she was foolish, but then they did not know the lieutenant—not as she knew him. They could not see the deeper side of his nature. His arm was about her, and his slightest touch thrilled her so that she could scarcely think connectedly.

"You're not repenting, are you?" he asked uneasily.

"No, why should I?" said Molly.

"There's reason enough," he answered; but she heard the note of need and longing in his voice, and she felt renewed belief in her power to help him to his best development.

He turned to her with a questioning glance, but her face reassured him, and he smiled—his old flashing smile, that first had caught her fancy.

"My aunt, you've a dimple there I've never kissed," he said, and he made up for his neglect before Molly could prevent it. Her will had weakened in such matters, and she could not always bring herself to follow a course of moderation.

The lieutenant laughed at her reserve. "Gad, one would think we were merely acquaintances, to see the distance you stand me off," he exclaimed.

"I've never had an acquaintance who stood off quite as little," said Molly.

He was about to answer, but he checked himself; he had been on the point of remarking that he had never known a girl who stood off quite as much.

"What were you going to say?" asked Molly.

"I was about to tell you what uncommonly blue eyes you've got," he said, and he leaned over and looked into them with a gaze as adoring as Molly could have wished. She forgot what they had been talking about, and so did he.

"You will marry me right away, won't you?" he begged.

"I thought you couldn't afford to get married," said Molly.

"I can't, but I suppose we shall get on some way. I shall have my pay, of course, and then my money's been piling up a bit since I've been in the war, and in this country, and that ought to help a trifle. I dare say we could live on it for a while—until my mother comes 'round."

"You mean she won't like me," said Molly. She looked straight before her and she spoke with dignity, even with a touch of haughtiness and pride.

He took her hand and held it firmly, saying nothing, and nothing that he could have said would have pleased Molly more.

"I suppose she wanted you to make a brilliant match," she said slowly.

"There's no use in her scheming for it, for I've told her I won't," he answered. "Besides, the girl is a dough-face, and I wouldn't have married her even if I hadn't seen you. She's not keen about me, either, for she's in love with a friend of mine in the Coldstream Guards."

"Has she a lot of money?" asked Molly.

He shrugged his shoulders, but made no other reply.

"I didn't know you were so indifferent about money," said Molly.

"Indifferent! My word, I should like to be." He spoke rather sadly.

"Then your getting any money will depend upon your mother's liking me," said Molly.

"There's no use supposing she will like you, for I know very well she won't," the lieutenant remarked gloomily.

Molly was glad that he did not count upon the impression she was to make, and said so. "I'd a thousand times rather get on with next to nothing," she told him.

He looked at her admiringly. "You're a little sport," he said. "But the trouble is, it's darned unpleasant on next to nothing, and I want you to have the things you ought to have."

"I don't need very many things," said Molly.

"Possibly not, here," he answered, "but in London, even in war-times, it's different."

It certainly would be very different; the realization of it came over her suddenly.

"Are you sure you will like me in London?" she asked.

"There's not a woman there who can touch you," he said.

"Why not stay in this country?" she asked longingly.

"Because England is at war."

"We are, too," Molly announced proudly.

"All the more reason for getting across," he answered.

That was true, but Molly did not want to go across. "Let's walk; it's getting cold here," she said suddenly.

It was, indeed, turning colder; the wind had strengthened, too, and the sky was lowering and

dark. White gulls flew back and forth in high relief against the clouds.

"We are going to have a gale, and a freeze, too," Molly prophesied.

"You're weather-wise as well as everything else," he told her, and he caught her as she ran along in front of him, and drew her again into his arms. He had a wonderful touch, and his caresses were never awkward. They seemed to tell his feeling with both delicacy and ardor.

She was keenly aware of all his refinements of expression in those rare moments when she surrendered herself entirely to his charm. He chafed under the restraints which she still tried to impose. Molly dreaded satiety, the slayer of love. It was not that she distrusted Wrexham, or herself, but rather that the very strength of her feeling awoke the instinct by which it might best be conserved. This might not have been so with all men, nor, indeed, with all women, but Molly was dealing with concrete personalities. There were no abstractions in her mind when she felt the lieutenant's lips upon her own. It was hard to disengage herself, always to have to cut short those ecstatic moments, yet better that than for them to lose one shade of their ecstasy.

"Does that satisfy you?" he demanded, as she accomplished one of her elusive movements.

"No," said Molly truthfully, "but I don't like the feeling of being satisfied."

"You are an odd girl, believe me," he exclaimed,

yet it was in admiring acceptance of her oddity that he spoke.

The wind blew her skirts close about her, and the soft curls of hair were whipped back from her face. She looked, in her supple young strength, like a victory, with a touch of austerity in the inspiration that she gave. Wrexham felt her call; it stirred his manhood with an unexplained appeal. He could do and dare with that triumphant form before him. For once, he did not even see the signs of poverty about her dress. She seemed, indeed, a radiant creature, clothed upon with courage and with hope. Perhaps it was merely that he, too, responded to the challenge of the wind as it swept past them in cutting gusts, and flung high the last brown leaves of winter, the ashes of a verdant year.

"I'm so glad that Mr. Weldon didn't go down the river," said Molly.

"Didn't go? Gad, but he did!" the lieutenant cried.

She turned to him in surprise. "Aren't you going to be with him any more?"

"I'm not with him to-day. You didn't fancy I should go off in a puff-boat after what you told me last night, did you?" he asked. "My word, I should have gone crazy looking about for oyster-beds when you were just back here on the shore."

"I ought not to be wasting the morning this way," Molly said, with a remembrance of the duties she had neglected in order to snatch this joy from the hand of Fate.

"Do you call this wasting it?" he asked. "I can't remember any day that's been more to me, though I've done a lot of unpleasant things in them, standing about on duty, and having an infernally fatiguing time."

"Was there virtue in that?" asked Molly.

"Certainly not, from my point of view. I was taking a squint at it from yours. I've always known you didn't have to do the silly things you've preferred to talking to me."

"I didn't prefer them," Molly confessed, "but very often they had to be done."

"And the other times?" the lieutenant questioned.

"I've always been afraid I'd fall in love with you," she answered.

"No such thing," he declared. "I had it from you last night you wanted to tantalize me past what I could endure."

"Your endurance isn't particularly great," said Molly. She threw a smile back at him as she spoke, and he thought her anew the most desirable person in the whole wind-swept world.

"Who would have thought last night that there would have been such a change by this morning?" she said.

"Weldon suspected it," the lieutenant answered. "He's a shrewd fellow on the weather."

"Who's with him to-day?" she asked.

"Nobody's with him. He was rather nettled about it. I said to him: 'You'd better stay ashore yourself; but at any rate, I'm not going.'"

Molly looked at him curiously. "Were you afraid of the weather?" she asked.

"No, I wasn't afraid. Why should I be? But I'd got you in my head, so that I couldn't have kept his old junk of an engine going for him. I'd have been as apt to blow it up as not."

"You mean you let him go off in this weather by himself just so that we could be together?" asked Molly.

"Why not? I'm not apprenticed to him. I've not enlisted for the term of the oyster-season."

"But he depended upon you; he would have had somebody else with him but that he expected you," Molly said quickly.

"He managed for a while before he took me on," the lieutenant answered.

"That was in good weather," said Molly.

"Quite so. He shouldn't have gone down this morning."

"I wish you hadn't stayed behind." She spoke with an intensity that surprised him.

"You mean you'd rather have me down there in the storm," he asked, sudden bitterness in his voice.

"It's not that I want you to be in danger," Molly said.

"I understand you," he answered. "You'd rather have me in danger than have me not come up to your idea of my obligation."

"My idea has nothing to do with it," Molly argued. "It was your obligation."

"As you see it," he answered.

"I might have forgiven you if it had been that you were afraid," she said.

"That's where we differ; I couldn't have forgiven myself," he exclaimed.

She went on, regardless of his interruption: "But that you should have let Mr. Weldon go down alone merely that we might enjoy ourselves here together is more than I can understand."

She spoke from the full force of her nature. He recognized that, and though he was angry, something within him arose and met the demand that she made upon him. He longed to stand accredited in her eyes. What is more, he saw the situation as she saw it, in spite of the shrug with which he received her outburst. He had not meant to desert Weldon, it was merely that the desire to be with Molly had been stronger than anything else. He had made a mistake—above all things, a mistake with a woman like Molly. He loved her the more that she could call him to account. He seemed so far below her standards in all the things that she really valued, yet he felt that he might be able to keep to some higher level under the spur that she could give. She seemed to offer the only salvation from the life of emptiness that his better self despised.

He was filled with a sudden determination to command her respect. Molly was a hard mistress; her love was hard to gain, and hard to keep. He had not suspected the difficulties that the wind would blow in his way. A few minutes before they

had looked upon life from the shelter of a lee shore. Then, just with a turn, they had faced the storm—not a passing wind, capricious and diverting, but a strong, steady blast from the ocean, where the great forces of the air are free and wild.

The lieutenant was angry. He probably would have said something unpleasant but that Molly did the one thing that would prevent him. She slipped her hand in his, and looked up into his face.

"You didn't know it was going to blow so hard, did you?" she asked.

He answered her in the very best way that he could answer. "Yes, I knew it, but I didn't care," he said.

He found himself growing tragic over his failure to go with Weldon. His tone was wonderfully gentle. She heard in it, also, sincerity of regret.

"I wish you had gone, dear," she whispered, and she kissed him of her own accord.

"I'll go now," he said determinedly.

"That's nonsense. You can't."

"I'll show you," he said, and he ran down the face of the bluff. There was a little sailboat drawn up on the sand below. The lieutenant threw his weight against it, and slid it into the water.

"What are you going to do?" called Molly.

For answer he jumped into the boat with a cat-like leap.

"Don't go in that," she begged; "it's foolhardy."

"I can't stay ashore now," he said; "I'd rather have a ducking."

"Don't be absurd. You couldn't catch Mr. Weldon anyway," said Molly.

"I'll catch him; the tide's still running out, and I know where he is to be found," he answered.

"That boat leaks," she told him.

"The boat's not so bad; I was in it yesterday," he flung back at her, and began to shake out the sail.

Molly grew desperate. She resorted to woman's time-honored cry: "If you loved me you wouldn't go."

"It's because I love you that I'm going." The wind caught the canvas, and he jumped for the helm. "Good-by," he called. He swung his cap as he cleared the end of the wharf.

Molly leaned far over and called to him imploringly: "Please don't go!"

"I've got to," he called in reply. It was not to be expected that he would turn back then; besides, he felt the excitement of the wind and the tide.

She watched him until the little sail seemed but a fleck of light upon the water—another seabird, buffeted by the storm.

That was a long day for Molly. She spent it in the house, where she could not see the storm. Each blast that rattled the windows shook her courage and swept through her heart. The wind increased and the temperature dropped—a winter's storm. The smoke blew down the chimney, and the house cracked in the cold.

"Why don't you settle down, Molly? You are like a lost spirit," her mother said.

"It's the wind," said Molly. That was not the time to tell of her engagement to Wrexham; she was too torn with anxiety to combat the objections that might be raised.

"We haven't had a storm like this for many a year," said her mother. "I hope Mr. Weldon has come back."

"Have you heard the boat?" Molly asked quickly.

"I couldn't hear anything above this wind," her mother answered.

Molly stole out to the bluff. Twigs and moss and dead branches were flying through the air, but she made her way to Celia's wharf, where Weldon was in the habit of landing. It was early afternoon, but already the darkness was falling from a lead-colored sky. Celia was out, too, casting uneasy glances toward the distant wide stretch of the sound.

"Has Mr. Weldon come back?" Molly asked, though she knew that he had not come, from one look at Celia's anxious face. She remembered a picture she had seen of fisherwives in Brittany. It showed the same sky to seaward, and the same expression of strained anxiety in the faces on the shore.

"It's early yet," Celia said.

"It's after four," said Molly; "he ought to be here."

"He's such a careful sailor, he'll be all right," Celia assured herself.

Then Molly told her about the lieutenant.

"Do you mean that John Weldon is managing that boat by himself?" Celia demanded.

"It's a good deal better than being in a leaky yawl with a sail," Molly answered.

"What folly! How could he have done it?" cried Celia.

Molly did not explain the impetus that she had given. Instead she scanned the river and suddenly she found the motor-boat, flying before the wind on the incoming tide. Neither of them asked how many were in it, but they kept their eyes on its approach. At last further uncertainty was impossible; there was only one man in the boat. Celia looked at Molly and saw how white she was.

"He must have gone ashore on one of the islands," said the girl, with considerable composure for one whose nerves had been strung up since the morning.

"Of course," said Celia, yet neither believed what she said.

Weldon made his boat fast to the buoy and came ashore in a bateau.

Molly could not ask him the question for whose answer they had waited, but Celia asked it.

"Have you seen Mr. Wrexham?"

"No, he wouldn't go with me this morning." It was evident from Weldon's tone that he had resented the lieutenant's defection. It did not occur to him to think the question a strange one to be asked of him as he stepped on shore after battling with a storm. He was too occupied with Celia—the fact that she should have come to meet him in the wind and the cold.

"You must get under shelter," he said, "you and Miss Hunter."

"Mr. Wrexham went down the river in the catboat to join you," said Molly, coming closer so that her voice would not be lost.

"To join me? When?" asked Weldon wonderingly. She told him, and he stopped in his walk and looked back at the river. "A catboat couldn't live in this gale," he said. "Where did he expect to come up with me?"

"He said he knew where you'd be," said Molly.

"He was mistaken; I didn't go where I'd planned to-day!"

"Don't you suppose he landed on one of the islands?" Celia asked.

"He may have, if he could make one of them, and if his boat floated long enough."

"Why shouldn't it float?" Celia demanded.

"Because it leaks, and it ships the sea," Molly answered tersely.

"I'll run back for him," said Weldon, quite as a matter of course.

Celia put out her hand as though she would have stopped him, but she knew he had to go back, and she dropped her hand upon the railing. "Not by yourself, John," she begged.

"I haven't time to hunt for a man," he answered.

"I can run that engine," said Molly, and she moved eagerly toward the end of the wharf.

Weldon stopped her. "I won't take you with

me," he said decidedly, and she saw that he meant his refusal.

"Get Zeke," Celia suggested quickly.

"I can't wait to find him," Weldon declared.

"I'll get him. I know where he is," Molly cried, and she was off before he could protest further. She darted back to the land, and ran down the road to the woods at full speed.

Weldon called to her, but his voice was carried off by the wind. "There's no use in her going; I can't wait for Zeke," he said again.

"I beg that you will," said Celia. She touched his arm, and her fingers trembled with an intensity of feeling that surprised him.

"I'll be all right," he assured her.

He turned so that she might hear him, for talking was difficult. The wind seemed almost to blow them together, as he sheltered her from it. He gave her such a satisfying sense of protection, the absolute physical protection of his body breaking the wild force of the storm. The realization of what he meant to her, what he might mean, came overwhelmingly upon her. To let him go now, back into the dangers of the sea, seemed more than she could bear. Yet she knew that he must go. He would not have been to her what he was had he hesitated in his course. That was true; nevertheless, she did the one thing that might cause him to hesitate—she raised her face so that he might look into it, and see there all that he had longed in vain to see through years of apparently unvalued devo-

tion. She did more. She said: "I should die if anything were to happen to you, John."

He put his hands upon her shoulders—eager hands, that trembled to take all that she offered. For a moment he could not speak, then he pushed her away from him with renewed decision. "I can't wait," he said. "The daylight is going. There'll be no chance at all if I get there at night."

He threw out his words in jerky sentences, each one of which cost him a struggle. Then he left her quickly and unfastened the bateau that was tossing on the waves. He dropped into it without another glance at Celia, and rowed laboriously out into the stream. It took all of his muscle to reach the motor-boat, but he did it, and he got the engine under way before she had moved from the spot where he had left her.

She tried to think of Wrexham in the extremity of danger. She tried to think how right it was that duty should be done unflinchingly, unswervingly. She tried to shake free from thoughts of herself, and of her claim upon the man in the boat, the man who turned his wheel about with such ready courage to answer a call for help. She tried, and yet she might as well have attempted to keep the marsh from bending before the wind. The music of love rang within her, deafening and insistent, the full deep melody, with its strangely mingled notes—bitterness and wild resentment that he should have rushed into danger at the very moment when their hearts had met—pride in his achievement and his strength, and

joy in the realization that her own nature had come into the fulness of its capability.

Weldon made little progress down the stream. Slowly, though, he gained headway. The tide would soon be with him, for it was near the turn; the venture would have been impossible otherwise. Celia stood there a long time, following the boat into the hardly won distance. When she went back to land at last, Molly was coming down the path. She had quite forgotten Molly, who was stumbling with fatigue and quite breathless.

"Zeke has gone to town," she gasped as she reached Celia's side. "He'll have to take me."

"He's gone," said Celia.

"Gone!" Molly echoed. They turned simultaneously and searched the gray tossing stream for the motor-boat.

"I hear it," Molly cried.

Celia heard it, too, but its outline had merged into the water, or the cloud, or the marshy shore. Weldon and his motor-boat had disappeared toward the sea.

He took with him one thought that surged through his very being and drowned the roar of the storm. Never once did he revile the fate that had denied him Celia's love until an occasion when even the time for its acceptance was not his own. There was not room in his heart for that sort of thing, and yet, despite his absorption, his every power of will and attention seemed bent upon the work in hand. He fought the storm with stubborn determination,

turning to his use every small power in his boat and every advantage that might be seized from the current or the wind. He knew the coast with scientific accuracy, for he had charted the drifts and the shoals, and there were two areas where he felt that it might be worth while to look for Wrexham—whether in or out of his leaky catboat.

It seemed a hopeless search to those on shore, for the night was undoubtedly coming, coming under cover of the clouds, a full hour before it was due, and the broad stretch of the sound gave full sweep to fears.

“Come in,” said Celia as she and Molly reached her gate. She wanted Molly’s presence to divert the attention of Mrs. Hightower from herself. She had no desire to meet her aunt’s scrutiny just then. Her feeling for Weldon was too sacred to be bared to caustic comment or complacent congratulations. It would be well that Molly should share the lady’s attention.

Mrs. Hightower, however, was truly concerned for the safety of both the men, and very discreet in her observation of Celia and Molly, as they sat in meditation on either side of the fire. She had endured anxieties of her own, and, having lived through them, she had acquired a wisdom and a poise which she was able, in a degree, to pass on to others.

“Don’t worry about ’em,” she said. “Nine times out of ten men will come out all right. Just keep the fire going and get a hot supper.”

These were things that could be done, and Celia

went out to the kitchen at once. Lizzie, the maid, had left for the night.

"Can't I help?" Molly begged, standing in the doorway.

Mrs. Hightower kept her seat, and apparently her interest in reflection.

"What made Wrexham put to sea?" she asked in a low voice, when Celia came back into the room.

"I can't imagine," said her niece.

"Molly could tell you, I dare say," Mrs. Hightower remarked. "When a man behaves like an absolute fool there is apt to be some woman at the bottom of it."

"I feel sure John will find him," said Celia, with fictitious cheer.

"He'll find him, if he's there," Mrs. Hightower answered enigmatically. "But don't worry, Celia," she said, in a kind voice of entire understanding, "John Weldon is perfectly safe in any sort of boat."

CHAPTER XVII

MOLLY went home, but came back to Celia's again before night. As she passed the Pentons' house, where the lieutenant boarded, the door opened and Robert ran out, clumping down the steps, and calling to her through the gloom.

"Mama says: 'Where's Mr. Wrexham?'"

Molly explained as well as she could.

"Gee, I guess he's drowned," cried Robert in cheerful excitement.

She reproved him, yet his exclamation unnerved her, it was the natural deduction from the facts.

"If he ain't drowned, he's froze," said Robert.

"Go back in the house," Molly directed, and she left him abruptly and went upon her way.

It was to the bracing companionship of Mrs. Hightower that she hastened. There was an unexpectedly helpful influence about Mrs. Hightower. It came from a fair estimate of chances and a reliance upon a favorable outcome that seemed to be based upon experience rather than upon mere optimism.

Molly ran out upon the wharf before she went in the house, but there was neither sight nor sound of the boat.

"It's too soon," said a voice from the gloom as she got back to the bluff; Celia was at the gate.

"I came to hunt for Orion," she explained. The cat was nowhere about, however, and she went in the house with Molly. A little later they were both out again, for they found it hard to keep still. There was no doubt then about the night; it was black, so black that at first there was difficulty in telling where the trees stopped and the sky began, yet the wide open reach across the river showed faintly gray as the eyes became accustomed to estimate the values of the great masses of shadow. The force of the wind seemed steadily increasing.

Molly stood for a moment on the veranda, then she went back in the house again without saying a word. She could not look at the night and hold herself together.

Celia listened attentively; she thought again that she heard the cat. He did not come at her call, but at last, in the blackness of the garden, she saw two tiny balls of green fire. Guided by them, she found him, crouched unhappily beneath a palmetto bush. He got up and rubbed against her, and she enticed him back to her door. There he hesitated. She could only crack it a little on account of the wind. Clearly Orion was tempted to enter. Outcries from Mrs. Hightower concerning the draft made it evident that the invitation could not be held open indefinitely. Celia decided for him; she picked up Orion and took him inside.

"See who has come in," she said.

"Do you call that a who?" Mrs. Hightower inquired. She made no unpleasant comments upon

the visitor, however. He did not need the one caution that she gave him: "Keep away from me." On the whole, Mrs. Hightower behaved very well, and so did the cat, though it must be admitted that Orion did not seem entirely at his ease in a lady's parlor. He walked about cautiously, half crouching to be ready for flight. He jumped at every noise, and his furtive expression was far from becoming. He lapped a little cream in the chimney-corner, nevertheless, and, having pounced upon a beetle that came out of the wood-box, he settled down at last on a newspaper, after declining all softer accommodations. There was not much grace or repose about his attitude; he hunched himself together, and wrapped his tail close about his feet. At least, he was warm, though, and, realizing that, he went to sleep.

It was ten o'clock before Weldon's whistle blew. The wind brought the sound from far down the river, as he knew that it would.

"What's that?" said Mrs. Hightower.

Molly and Celia were on their feet. Orion, wakened so rudely, got under a chair without waiting to find out what was the matter.

"Did you hear it?" asked Molly.

Celia threw open the door. "Oh, yes, quite plainly," she exclaimed, for the whistle had sounded again.

"Shut that," called Mrs. Hightower. "What's the use of warming up the house if you're going to cool it off just as they come?"

"I knew he'd come back all right," Celia cried

out, the relieved tension of her nerves expressing itself almost without thought.

Molly was trembling as she stood by the fire.

"Both of them are all right," said Mrs. Hightower. "John Weldon wouldn't have tooted his horn if they hadn't been."

"I didn't think about that," said Molly. She sat down quickly as she spoke. It was odd how weak she felt all of a sudden.

Celia got on her coat and ran out with the lantern.

"It's too soon," said Mrs. Hightower, "they won't be here for some time."

Molly did not move; she could not. Mrs. Hightower went into another room and left her to herself. She regained her poise quickly and had started to join Celia when the older lady came back, with her sumptuous-looking cloak on.

"Are you going out too?" asked Molly.

"Yes, I am," Mrs. Hightower answered. "I can't stand sitting by the fire when there's something doing on the outer wall. Go on, don't help me," she ordered incisively.

Molly took her at her word. She herself got only as far as the gate. Then she heard voices, and by the light of Celia's lantern she saw two, no, three forms upon the wharf.

Celia called out just then a glad halloo, and Molly sent back an answering shout. There was a suggestion of something wild and hysterical in the unexpected high note at the end. It seemed to be

just the dramatic touch of emotion that no one had dared to express, and it came near to unnerving everybody. Even Mrs. Hightower felt a quiver as that cry of Molly's rang through the darkness. Molly was ashamed of herself; she had not meant to be theatrical. She went 'way out into the shadow, and when the procession had passed she fell in behind.

Mrs. Hightower took command as soon as they got into the house. The firmness of her hand upon the situation was pleasant to lean back upon; they all felt like children in their reliance upon her direction.

"Don't talk to 'em," she ordered. "Bring in the coffee."

The men made no demur; they were both of them about played out. There was a give to Weldon's stalwart figure, yet, but for the deepening of one or two lines, his face showed little sign of the strain he had been under. In the lieutenant's slight physique, however, the evidences of exhaustion were unmistakable. He sank into a chair and sat there, his head in his hands, and languor in every muscle. When he raised his head to take the coffee that Celia handed to him, the pallor of his face, in contrast to his eyes and the dark mass of his hair, was startling. It was easy to see that his heart might have interfered materially with his usefulness upon the fields of France.

Weldon looked at him uneasily; it would be decidedly awkward if Wrexham should collapse.

"Get off that sofa, John, and let him lie down," Mrs. Hightower ordered.

Wrexham shook his head; he had not the energy to leave his seat. He drank the coffee eagerly, though, and it helped him to rally a little. He looked about the room with a slightly questioning expression, then he heard a noise and, turning, he found Molly on the other side of him, a little to the rear.

"You here?" he asked, a sound of content in his voice.

"Have you just seen me?" she answered, though she had been taking care to keep out of his line of vision.

"You were right about that boat," he said, after a pause.

Every one looked at Molly, and she blushed—the lieutenant's comment seemed to connect her so unmistakably with his adventure.

"You are soaking wet," she said suddenly.

"I was, but I dried out a bit by the engine. I got my feet damp going ashore," he replied.

Weldon amplified the statement. "He walked for a mile on a sand-bank, in water up to his waist, and if he hadn't done it, he wouldn't be here now. He waved me down from a little hummock on the edge of the Sound."

"And where was his boat?" Mrs. Hightower inquired.

"I had misplaced the boat," the lieutenant remarked.

She fixed him with a severe eye. "Young man, you are evidently better," she said. "Celia, bring in the supper." Mrs. Hightower believed in the creature comforts, and this was a time when the simplest of them, at least, were certainly needed. Heat and nourishment went a long way toward helping both men to recuperate. The lieutenant, indeed, was quite able to go home when Molly started.

"Shall I give you an arm?" Weldon asked. He knew he was not wanted, but he felt that he might be necessary.

"No, thank you," said Molly at once. She looked very fresh and strong, quite competent to breast the wind and steer the lieutenant, too, if he needed help.

Weldon did not want to go just then, so he let her refusal stand.

Wrexham took his hand. "There must be some sort of speech one makes to a life-saver," he said. "I shall look it up and get it off to you." His words and his tone were light, but the clasp of his hand was firm, and he looked into Weldon's eyes with a sincerity of gratitude that could not be misunderstood. He never liked to be emotional, and his desire to escape that pitfall gave a lack of dignity to his speech. Fluent as he was, he never seemed able to meet any serious conversational demand.

Weldon understood him, though, and liked his offhand remarks rather better than if he had pro-

duced the speech to the life-saver, that he had promised to look up.

"That was a close shave," he said, when Molly and the lieutenant had gone.

"He's a worthless rascal, and I dare say it would have been better to leave him in the water," Mrs. Hightower said. "You can't do those things, though," she added with a sigh of regret. "We've always to put a spoke in the wheel of Providence."

"It's the will of Providence that he should be saved," Celia argued.

"Possibly so. He may be intended as a means of discipline for somebody; the only thing is I hope it's not for Molly."

Neither of the others said anything; they were oppressed by the fact that it was for Molly.

"How well they look together," said Celia, after a moment.

"Very well," said Mrs. Hightower. "If looks were everything, he'd be a winner. I guess he is one, anyway," she admitted reluctantly.

"You've never been quite fair to him," said Celia.

"Very probably," her aunt admitted. "I'll confess it disturbed me somewhat to have John Weldon risk his life to bring a man like that back to a place that would be better off without him."

"Why, you were just as concerned about him as any of us were here to-night," said Weldon.

"That's due to the inconsistency of the sex," Mrs. Hightower answered, and she rose, putting an end

to the discussion. "If you two will excuse me, I'm going to bed."

Weldon opened the door for her, and she sailed out.

He and Celia were alone. He drew a deep breath of relief; it had been maddening to see her near him all the evening, yet to have had no word or look from her. Not once had she met his gaze. She sat now on a low stool, looking intently into the fire. He stood where Mrs. Hightower had left him, across the room. Each was acutely conscious of the other, yet neither spoke. At length the silence grew painful in its intensity. He drew a chair behind Celia.

"Do you mind if I sit here a while?" he asked.

"Stay as long as you like," she answered, and she got up and fixed the fire. Her manner chilled him; it seemed to check his approach. He got up, too, and stood again, looking at her. Possibly he had mistaken her meaning that afternoon on the wharf. She had spoken in the stress of excitement, and of a deep concern for his welfare. A woman might very easily misinterpret her meaning under those conditions.

"If my presence annoys you, I'll go," he volunteered.

"No, you don't annoy me," said Celia.

That was a comforting assurance, but it did not seem to lead to anything. He found himself baffled by the blank wall that she presented, and then, quite unexpectedly, the strain he had endured, both

physical and nervous, told upon him, and he broke into a torrent of speech.

"What do you treat me in this way for?" he cried. "Why did you say what you did if you didn't mean it? Do you think I can stand this sort of thing indefinitely for your amusement? I used to think you had a heart somewhere; I don't believe you've got one now."

She turned slowly and met his eyes. "Why, John," she said, and he saw the same glorious vision that he had seen on the wharf in the storm.

"Oh, forgive me," he cried, and he made one long step toward her and came into his own. Speech was no longer necessary to them. The fire crackled and the wind roared. An army of acorns rolled down the roof unnoted, save by Mrs. Hightower, who anathematized them because she could not go to sleep.

Celia drew up her little stool and sat close beside Weldon, where she could look into his face. She had such infinite content in her surrender.

"I always knew I was going to marry you eventually," she said.

"I wish I had known it," he said. He thought of the years in which he had been trying to win her love, much as he thought of the storm through which he had lately battled. The two ideas seemed connected, in some odd way, and the wind, howling about the tight little house, might have been the old longings and desires that had tossed him so mercilessly upon a dreary, hopeless sea. Struggle

and effort were over now, though. He would not again have to live without incentive.

It was late when he left. Mrs. Hightower had got the better of the acorns and had dropped asleep. Orion, now stretched at ease by the fire, looked at him disapprovingly through one half-shut eye. Celia produced her lantern, and Weldon went off down the winding path through the woods, a radiant spirit in a tempest-tossed world. His tin house, cold and dark, might have seemed calculated to chill the heart of his joy, temporarily, at least, but it had no such effect. He was used to hardships; they did not depress him.

"The thing now will be to get used to happiness," he said to himself with a quizzical smile, for his surroundings had an odd air of unreality in the light of this new rapture that had burst upon him. They were so bare, so meagre—as his life had been until to-night. Certainly he deserved Celia, though he would have been the last to have made a claim so pretentious. To him she seemed a gift from the gods that he did not merit.

Celia herself had the grace to be conscience-stricken when she thought of the bleak, unsatisfying existence that John Weldon had had. "I might just as well have done it five years ago," she said, as she sat where he had left her. Yes, of course, she might have done it, but she could not have given him then what she did now. How strange—there was no new light that had been brought to bear upon him! The difference must have been in herself.

"I've just arrived at the point where I'm able to appreciate him," she thought. Suddenly the remembrance of him came over her with startling reality. "I didn't know I could be so foolish about him," she cried, and she got up and walked about the room in the nervous transport of her emotion. "It's worth waiting for, Orion," she said. That was the same conclusion at which Weldon himself had arrived.

Orion was not disturbed by the exclamations that were directed toward him. He continued his slumbers until the door opened suddenly, and Mrs. Hightower, in a purple and gold dressing-gown, stood upon the threshold.

"Aren't you going to put out this light before morning?" she inquired. "It shines right into my window."

Celia turned to her in unexpected confidence. "I'm going to marry John Weldon," she said.

"I supposed you would, as soon as you saw it was possible to lose him," said Mrs. Hightower.

"It was not that," Celia protested.

"Well, go to bed; we'll talk about it in the morning. Let's get to sleep now," said her aunt with an air of exasperation. She considered the night's rest seriously, when once she had settled to it.

Celia was obedient. She gathered up Orion and dropped him outside, then she put out the light. She did not sleep until morning, and yet her thoughts, with John Weldon as their inspiration, were full of happiness and content.

Molly's were not so tranquil. Poor Molly had always an uneasy feeling somewhere back of her consciousness, a sort of spectre that haunted her thoughts. Whenever she looked at it in the charmed light of love it vanished, but it rose again at unexpected moments, usually when she was trying to get to sleep, sometimes, though, in broad daylight, when there were any number of normal practical things that should have absorbed her attention. It was silly of her to yield to fear, now, she felt, when the lieutenant loved her so ardently, and on this night of all others, when her heart should be full of such deep thankfulness at his rescue. Suppose he had been swept out to sea! She shut her eyes and trembled to think of the blank that would have been left in her own life if that had happened.

Even as she did so, a dark, shapeless form leaped up somewhere in her brain. It was a creature of the wind that wailed outside the thin walls of her room. There was a tree that brushed against the house. No wonder she was sleepless; any one would be nervous on such a night. It was good not to be anxious any more, at any rate. With that burden gone, her thoughts slipped back to the cause that had led to the lieutenant's going out in the catboat. Suddenly the shapeless spectre took form—she knew that Wrexham did not think very much about duty. Molly had been brought up on duty. That was just it—it was merely a matter of having been brought up in one way or another. She was apt to

be rigid in such things—she felt her personal equation. He was more spontaneous, he was broader; naturally, he thought her narrow. Possibly she was narrow—sometimes. And yet she had a mighty respect for the strength that can hold to an irksome routine. There are other kinds of strength, though, she knew that. It takes strength, and above all things, it takes courage, to meet a sudden demand—to make a dash “over the top.”

How dazzling he had looked when he waved his cap to her from the little boat, as the wind caught the sail. He had done that, too, just for her. She knew it—he needed not to tell her. But she did not like to feel that a man did his duty just for her. There rose the spectre again, grimacing like a gargoyle. It was not his duty, though, to go on such a wild adventure. He had been foolhardy, as she had said, and no man should behave in that way. Again she was getting back into her rigid, restricted attitude. Why must she try to mould everything to her way of thought?

She sat up and pulled the cover tight about her. It was cold in her room, and so dark. That was the cedar tree scraping on the other side of the house—how plainly she could hear it. There was no use trying to sleep. She lighted her candle. Candles were used in Molly's house on account of necessity, not fashion; there was a great scar in the middle of her mirror where once the flame had come too close. What was the use of lighting the candle? There was nothing that she could read. Yes, there was

her Bible. She slipped out of bed and got it, stepping hurriedly over the icy floor. Then she propped herself up on the pillows, and pulled the blankets around her throat. She opened the book and hunted for "the young man Absalom." The story had no connection with anybody she had ever known—yet Absalom must have had splendid hair. "From the sole of his foot even to the crown of his head, there was no blemish in him." She liked that sentence. What a wonderful young man Absalom must have been! She dropped the book on the bed and her eyes closed. After a while she remembered about the candle and blew it out.

She must have gone to sleep, she assured herself of that, for suddenly Edie Ingot was smiling at her over the foot of the bed. Now, Molly had never seen Edie Ingot. She had never even seen the picture of her that Wrexham carried about with him—the one that Robert had told her stood on his bureau—but she knew this was Edie, just the same. She knew it because the face was so radiantly lovely, and because it looked at her with such an amused, and such a triumphant expression. She shook herself awake in her anger; she would not submit to such mockery, even in her dreams. There was actually a ray of sunlight shining in her face. Sunlight, after such a storm! How good it was! How quickly the phantasies of the night pass with its shadows!

The sun did not stay out very long. Molly saw it go with a sense of depression. She had had enough

of bad weather; she felt the need of something that would clear her brain. London would be like this—cloudy. But there would be a round of violent activity going on somewhere. She hoped she would be able to fit into it all easily; she would hate to seem awkward. The lieutenant had great confidence, though, in her looks. That would help her—if they should last. Blondes are apt to break early, Mrs. Hightower had said. Nonsense, she was not breaking already. She was young, and he loved her. She looked in the old scarred mirror, and she could not help seeing that she was pretty. “Not ordinary-looking, either,” said Molly. Even his mother would have to admit that—his mother, the haunting, moneyed presence in the London fog.

All this before breakfast! Molly was not accustomed to nerves. She did not know that a day of anxiety can cause an aftermath that is almost as bad. She broke away from her melancholy imaginings, and ran down-stairs.

What a sweet, wholesome atmosphere prevailed in the half chilly dining-room! Yet their meals were always a scramble, the only object being that the young Hunters should get enough to eat.

“You don’t look well, Molly,” her mother said.

“Oh, don’t I?” Molly asked anxiously.

The lieutenant told her the same thing later; only he said: “Are you sure you’re feeling fit?”

“I didn’t sleep very well,” she admitted.

“I didn’t sleep well myself,” he exclaimed. “A man doesn’t, you know, after he’s appeared like an

ass. To be fetched back by Weldon! My word! I shouldn't have minded, but for you."

"How did I make things worse?" asked Molly, though she knew what he meant.

"I can't explain it exactly," he answered, "but all night I thought you were making depositions against me that I couldn't refute. I say, Molly, I had the hell of a night," he cried, with a vivid remembrance of its tormenting passage.

"I did too," Molly confessed.

"I wish the sun would shine," he said impulsively. "Edie used to say I was like a different fellow when the sun was out."

"Tell me how Edie looks," she said suddenly.

"Oh, I'm not much on description; I'll get you her picture," he answered, with a ready agreement that discounted her fears.

"Get it now," she begged.

"Oh, I say, it's in the bottom of one of my boxes," he protested. Robert had mentioned the top of his bureau; she was glad it had been put in the box.

"She must be very beautiful," Molly said.

He looked at her quickly—he had heard something unhappy in her tone. "I will get it, after all, if you like," he said, and he went off as he spoke.

He was back again in a few minutes, and he handed the picture to Molly—Edie, as she appeared in her last play at the Prince of Wales's Theatre, gay, sprightly, captivating, a woman who well might be feared.

"She's lovely," Molly said, as she gave the picture back to him.

"Yes, I think so," he agreed, and he tore the photograph across, and tossed it into the river.

"Oh, why did you do that?" cried Molly.

He shrugged his shoulders, but he took her hand and carried it to his lips.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE lieutenant was a charming lover. Molly threw her misgivings to the winds when he was with her, but they came flying back to her when she was alone. The dread of London hung like a pall upon her thoughts. She tried to get away from it, but the very effort only fixed it more securely in her mind.

A week had passed after the storm when Wrexham's orders came. He had got the appointment he wanted for London service, and he was called back for duty. He took the official communication to Molly. Her heart stopped beating at sight of the envelope, for she knew at a glance what it contained.

"Now," he said, "we'll be married right away."

She made no answer, but unfolded the paper, and read it slowly, then handed it back to him without a word. The color left her face, though—he saw that.

"It's better than France, Molly."

Yes, of course, it was better than France, but there were so many things that were better than that, and yet were very bad.

"I was uncommonly lucky to get it," he went on. "I shouldn't have it, I'm sure, if it hadn't been for

my mother's influence. I tell you, in London, a woman's got to be clever to keep her finger in the pie."

Molly sighed inwardly. She would never get her finger in, and she didn't want to, either.

"There's no use looking so blue about getting married," he said.

She laughed uneasily. "That order gives you only two weeks for getting there," she said, after a moment's reflection.

"Yes, you see the War Office was misinformed. I ought to have been given double time for getting you there, too."

"I'll wait for you here until you come back." She spoke lightly, but she listened for his answer.

It brought an unexpected idea. "I can't come back until the war is over."

The war, even though it meant wheatless days, and congested traffic, and endless knitting, and all the other things with which Americans were becoming familiar, had seemed to Molly too far off to touch her life in any real manner. Yet here it was, cutting off a way out that might have been possible.

"Until the war is over! That would be a long time to wait," she said slowly.

"Some weeks," he replied.

Quite true! There was no use letting their marriage hang upon the end of the war. It must be now, then, or— Molly looked about her with a wave of tenderness rising in her heart for the place

where she had lived. To exchange this, with the sense of assurance that it gave, for London!

The lieutenant left the subject of the war; he was more concerned with his own affairs. "I'd a cable from Edie, too," he announced, in great good spirits. He felt quite free to talk of Edie since he had made such a satisfactory disposition of her photograph, and he did talk of her, at some length. The thought of picking up his old life again was working in his mind like a magic potion—that was plain to see. He was catching threads of it here and there. Of course, things would be rather slow, now the war was on, but still it would be London. Edie had cabled to congratulate him on his luck in getting the staff appointment.

"How did she hear about it?" Molly questioned wonderingly.

"Oh, Edie's a shark," he answered. "She hears everything that is to be heard about her friends. She's like my mother in that. I shall be glad to see her in her new play." He was full of the interests that London offered.

"Is it much of a success?" Molly asked perfunctorily.

"She's always a success—it's not the play, it's Edie. She makes money hand over fist. The trouble is she has no head on her about keeping it. She used to turn her week's pay over to me, and I had to settle her bills. But if I wasn't there, she'd write out checks, and dig into her capital. Why even I tried to hold her up a bit, so you may know

it must have been bad. She's got a snug little sum, and she could live on her income, only she says the—what do you call the things, the pittance the companies pay to the owners?"

"Dividends," Molly suggested in a far-away tone. She followed every word that he said, yet her mind seemed to be grappling with something else. Just what it was she scarcely knew; she had a sense of struggle within her that she could not explain.

"That's it—dividends," said the lieutenant gayly. "Edie says they are so darned slow about coming in. And she's right there. She has a peach of a lawyer, though; he can get money for her at any time of the day or night."

"Why don't you employ him?" Molly suggested.

"I do, but he says it's not so easy to get it for me. My credit's not so good in the first place, and then, my property's sort of tied up. You see, it's difficult to raise any considerable amount without my mother's signature."

"What do you need so much money for?" Molly asked.

"Gad, you talk like my mother," he answered with a smile. "But, believe me, there's always a place for one's pennies in London. There's only one thing that gets rid of them that I don't indulge in, and that's horses. Of course I like them. I pat them, you know, and I give them a potato, or whatever it is that one gives horses, but I don't play the races. My father, now, was only half alive when the racing season was not on, and my uncle— My

uncle, though, has been rather unfortunate; he was ruled off the turf."

Molly did not understand the significance of being ruled off the turf, but she rose, as with a sudden decision. "I am going in," she said.

He looked up at her with a laugh. "Don't let my uncle alarm you. He and I are not particularly intimate. He has a great deal of money, but he'll never give me a penny, so I can afford to cut him, if you like."

"I don't want to cut anybody," said Molly. "Your uncle might like me."

"He probably would like you, uncommonly well," the lieutenant replied with sarcastic point, "but he won't get the chance, I can promise him that. Never gave me more than half a crown in his life! London is different from this little country road, Molly."

Molly did not answer; she looked straight down the river, where the sun danced on the water in the path of the breeze. How she loved the outline of those distant woods, low-lying against the sky! And yet she had wanted to leave all this; she had wanted to see the world. Surely London was the world. But never to come back, and with all of her happiness bound up in the man beside her! Somehow, she had never realized just what it would mean to marry the lieutenant. If she could hold him she would want nothing more. But if she couldn't! Her lips trembled, and she bit them to keep them still. It was no use. She turned quickly

to go, but he saw her face, he saw the tears that she tried to brush away. Others followed them; she could not keep them back.

He rose, filled with wonder. He had not believed that Molly could ever cry; she was not that kind. There was no mistake about those tears, though. They were not for effect, either, for she was trying her best to hide them. Something had hurt her; he saw that. He wondered if he had harped too long upon Edie. It could not be that; Molly had too much sense to misunderstand him.

He called her name with deep tenderness, and he tried to take her hands away from her face. "What have I done, Molly? What have I said?"

His voice was too much for her; she broke away from him and ran, scarcely knowing where she went, going anywhere to be away from him.

"Don't leave me this way, Molly!" he entreated, but she did not hear him. He did not follow her, for he saw that she wanted to be alone.

He looked after her, still wondering and perplexed; he felt, too, a vague uneasiness. There was something serious back of it all; Molly was not the kind of girl who makes scenes. How well she ran; she had a good figure. They would stop in New York and get her some clothes. That is, if he could manage to have some money cabled him. "We can't go to London with Molly dressed in this style," he thought, but he knew that something could be arranged, something always is arranged.

He dismissed the subject; it had merely caught

in his mind in passing. This strange departure of Molly's, these tears, disturbed him. He could not rid himself of his restless anxiety. It got on his nerves, as will a constant, dull pain, and the worst of it was he knew not what he feared, nor why he feared it.

Molly herself did not analyze the cause of her tears. She went up to her room and locked the door. The lock was rusty—she had turned it so seldom. She threw herself on the bed and wept until there were no more tears left to flow. Outside, the sunlight of the winter's day was radiant in the air; there was no wind, each leaf and twig was motionless. She seemed to look from her window into a lovely past, so lifeless, so still was it all. To live in a past, no matter how beautiful it was! Oh, no, she could not do that.

She opened her door and went into the hall again. The house was empty and still; dull, far-away sounds, as of voices, came to her from without. There were lives here, fixed in this inaction, this sunlit void. She marvelled at herself; she seemed to be two people, one of whom had made the greatest decision of her life, the natural outgrowth of her environment and her training. The real force of her nature seemed to be working out an inevitable destiny, that even her will could not resist. The other self, fiercely resentful, wildly longed for the joy that called to her with the ardent, full-throated voice of youth.

Molly had come to the first great conflict of her

life, her first real struggle with herself, her first knowledge, indeed, of some of the very forces that went to make her what she was. Everything about her was as it always had been, she herself had changed. She had grown older in these hours, yet all the setting of her existence seemed so changeless. There stood the chairs in their accustomed places; there was the old worn carpet, and there the pictures she had always known—"The Finding of the Cup in Benjamin's Sack," "Tasso Reading His Poems."

Outside, camelias bloomed, half hidden among their stiff, glossy leaves, opopanax and tea-olive perfumed the winter air. Always their fragrance would bring back to her that day. There were dull, hollow noises, too, that fixed themselves in her memory—hammering, away across the river, on an island in the marsh where somebody was mending a boat. Far in the distance a dog barked now and then.

Molly went to the spot where she and the lieutenant had sat together on the morning of the storm. It seemed filled with the sense of his presence, but, for that matter, every tree, every flower, every wind brought it to her. She could not sit there and think connectedly. It was foolish to fancy that she could think at all. She did not need to do so, for something stronger than thought seemed to dominate her. There was a fibre and a stamina about Molly, of which she had been unaware.

She did not see the lieutenant until night. The moon was in its second quarter; it threw a deep shadow on the bench beneath the old magnolia tree

in front of Molly's house. She waited there and called him as he passed.

He wheeled at the sound of her voice and came toward her eagerly. She looked fateful as she sat there, silence and immobility giving an air of mystery to her half-defined face and figure.

"Oh, I say, come into the light," he begged. His nerves were jangled by the day of uneasiness to which Molly's tears had condemned him. He took her hand and drew her into the moonlight, and she came. There was some spell in his touch that held her.

"My word, you shouldn't have left me as you did this morning."

Molly did not speak, but she took away her hand. There was a suggestion of remoteness about her that alarmed him.

"Gad, Molly, I can't stand this sort of thing. Tell me what it is," he said, and he turned to her with a violence, unconscious and insistent.

Molly gripped herself and held to the moorings of her nature. She tried to think of some way of telling him that would not hurt, but no gentle words came to her.

"Can't you speak to me?" he demanded, almost roughly, in the tensity of the moment.

"I'm not going to marry you," said Molly. "I'm going to stay here."

Silence followed her speech. Wrexham's outstretched hand fell slowly to his side. A man might sink that way in battle, Molly thought.

"When did you change your mind?" he asked.

"When your orders came." Her voice sounded strangely unreal.

"But you knew the orders were coming."

"Yes, I knew it."

"Then this has been a flirtation, an episode for you—educational, no doubt. For me, too, highly educational. I had thought that I was mistaken, and that love was something real."

Molly turned to him with a passionate gesture. "Don't you believe I love you?"

"Why should I believe it?" he answered.

Why, indeed? How could she convince him of her sincerity. She had not dreamed that he would doubt it, for her thoughts had been so filled with the sense of the suffering that their parting would cause to them both. Now she knew that there was more than this to be considered. Unless she would deal him a foul blow she must keep for him his belief in the things that are pure and lovely, and of good report.

"Think what my life is going to be without you!" said Molly. All her dread of it moaned in her voice.

"You did well enough before I came," he said, with his cynical shrug.

"That was a different matter. Every spot about here we have been in together."

He laughed. "I shall fancy you roaming around—a very pretty, romantic figure. Here, I let him kiss me, and by that tree I vowed eternal love. Oh, it would look well in a novel."

Molly was silent; she knew that she could expect no mercy at his hands.

"I shall tell Edie of my little fling, and she will laugh, believe me. She always said I was a bit of a fool to be looking out for the sentimental bunk. She used to say: 'You'll grow up, Dicky, one of these days and find out that that's the stuff they put in to please the children.'"

Molly turned to him unbelievably. "You couldn't do that, could you?" she asked. "You couldn't laugh over all this with another woman."

"Why not?" he said in reply. Then the harshness of his temper broke, for he had heard the note of suffering in her voice. "Oh, Molly, you do love me," he cried suddenly. He tried to draw her toward him, but she shook her head.

"Don't make it harder," she said. She met his eyes, though, with a look that he could not doubt.

"Tell me what you mean by it all," he begged.

She must tell him; it would not be fair not to do so. "You couldn't care for me long in London," she said.

"You think that?" he asked.

"I should be so ill at ease; I should have nothing to say to your friends."

"You don't suppose I'd introduce that theatrical set to you, do you?" he demanded.

"But you couldn't keep away from it," she said.

"Well, if I didn't, that wouldn't mean you'd have to get into it. Quite the contrary, I should prefer that you didn't."

These were new ideas, but they failed to reassure Molly as he hoped that they would. "I don't understand that sort of life," she said. "And then, there's your mother."

"My mother!" he cried. "You'll call on her twice a year—if she comes around—and that's no reason for breaking off."

"She'll never come around; she won't like me," said Molly.

"Gad, she wouldn't like anybody I married unless she'd sorted 'em out for herself."

"But—" Molly hesitated. "The lack of money," she began.

"Oh, that's it," he said, with a cutting edge to his voice.

"I don't care for it for myself," she assured him quickly. "I'm used to being poor, but you——"

He interrupted her. "Suppose you leave that matter to me."

"But you'd be so miserable; you'd make yourself so unhappy over it."

"You don't trust me," he said with a sudden outburst of indignation. "Other women go out into the world with the men who love them, and don't try to arrange everything beforehand. Why can't you? You don't believe in me—that's all there is to it."

Molly protested, but he mocked her with sarcasm.

"Yes, you believe. You believe what I've told you, and what you've seen for yourself. As for thinking I might rise to anything else—you've sense

enough to know I couldn't do it. I don't blame you; it's possible I couldn't have done it."

"Don't talk that way," she begged.

"I'll talk as I please. Throw me over, and then ask me to like it—my word!" His sense of outrage got beyond speech. Then his mood changed and the bitterness of his loss came upon him. "The worst of it is I've only myself to thank," he said. "It's my character that queers me whenever there's anything serious to be considered. If I were a man like Weldon do you suppose you would make all these silly objections?"

Molly said nothing; he had put the matter too clearly for denial. Silence fell; they had reached the wall that lay between them.

"Some women care enough to help a fellow to be what he'd like to be," he said.

Molly had thought once that she might be able to do just that thing; now she doubted herself. "I haven't courage enough for that. The man I marry has got to prove himself first."

"That's a safe policy," Wrexham remarked.

There was that in his tone which made Molly feel it necessary to justify herself. "Look at Mr. Weldon, since you spoke of him," she said. "Life has not been so smooth for him. He's been through a great deal—that's why he's so worth while."

"Are you putting me on probation?" he asked, with sudden hope.

Molly clutched at that suggestion. Why not? Her good sense, however, saved her. That sort of

thing would be foolish. "No, we must make a clean cut," she said.

His face contracted with pain. She saw it in the cold moonlight, and it took all of her strength to keep from putting her arms around his neck.

"Molly, you are hard," he cried. His voice broke unexpectedly, and he turned quickly and went away under the deep shadows of the oaks.

He did not know where he went; he followed the path with despair and anger in his heart. On he strode, he must move—along the bluff, past Celia's little house, back into the woods. Suddenly a man appeared just ahead; they met face to face.

"Get out of the way," the lieutenant cried.

"Moderate your tone," Weldon recommended.

"Oh, it's you, is it?"

"Can't you see it is?"

"Oh, yes, I see a man of character, an example for the rest of the world to follow." Wrexham snapped out the words in a vicious tone that Weldon found it necessary to notice.

"Why do you have to go about making yourself unpleasant?" he asked.

"Because I don't care what I say, or what I do. I'm going to the dogs as fast as I please."

The older man heard the unhappiness in the voice; he put a detaining hand on the lieutenant's shoulder. "What has happened?" he asked.

Wrexham hesitated for a moment, yet he must have some sympathy, some support. "Molly's thrown me over," he said shortly.

"Well, why not?" Weldon asked.

"Because she promised first to marry me. That's why."

"Any new light brought to bear upon you?"

"No, nothing. Just the consideration of my character—that's all."

"You think she was unwise?" asked Weldon slowly.

"Unwise!" cried the lieutenant. "Why do you ask these nonsensical questions? Who wants a woman to be anything else?"

"True," said Weldon. "But were you sure you could make her happy?"

"Who ever is sure?" the other demanded. "It's all a gambling chance."

"Not quite," Weldon assured him.

Wrexham laughed unpleasantly. "You're harking back to the matter of character again. You can afford to; you've got something to offer to a woman."

"Any man can build up his character," Weldon replied quietly.

"What's the use? She's not going to give me a trial. She's done with me."

"That's a figure of speech," said Weldon. "New conditions bring new answers."

For a moment the lieutenant looked at him with a gleam of hope in his eyes. Then he shook his head sadly. "I couldn't do it; I'm not you," he said, and he brushed past Weldon as he spoke, and went on down the path.

Weldon looked after him with a sigh of pity. Youth does not know how to spare itself; it gets the full strength of every bitter cup. It would have been worse for them both if Molly had married the lieutenant; anybody could see that, anybody could have predicted disaster. And yet—the impossible sometimes happens. Weldon felt himself full of regret that romance should have to be governed by facts, the relentless facts of character and circumstance.

The figure of Wrexham, flinging itself away from companionship into the quiet of the moonlit woods, stayed in his thoughts. It seemed like the vision of his own past.

"You are meditative," said Celia later.

"I'm merely looking backward at the unhappiness I've lived through," Weldon answered.

"I never can estimate things like that when they're over," she exclaimed.

"Something brought it to my mind," he said, but he would not tell her what had made it all so clear. His thoughts did not concern themselves much with Molly, because he had no way of telling how she felt. Weldon had made a study of one woman, but that had not enabled him to generalize as to the sex. He fancied Molly was to be viewed with sympathy, but he did not know.

Molly would not have asked for sympathy, but she suffered all the more because hers was the hand that had used the knife. She did not even know whether or not the world would call her cruel and

hard. Possibly she was so. How can one know what one is? She was unhappy enough, though, to square things off, and that ought to count for something.

She looked down the vista of the night with dread. Would the morning never come? She dressed at it's first breaking, and went out into the chill, damp air. Fog hung over the river; the trees loomed dark in the gray shroud. Suddenly the sun shot through it all. Iridescent colors played in the mist that lifted here and there. Molly had wandered down to Celia's wharf. How beautiful the world was! Why must the life that runs through it be filled with such conflict and such pain? The mist parted; masses of it rolled in soft billows across the marsh. The sun rose above the tree-line; the sky was freshly blue, wiped clean by the wet streamers of the fog.

Mrs. Hightower had contracted the uncomfortable habit of waking early. She sat up in bed; from her window she got the full sweep of the river view. She looked out inquiringly at the day. Was that Molly on the wharf? It undoubtedly was Molly; the red sweater was quite recognizable. What an hour to be out! Well, Molly's complexion could stand it. There are not many complexions that look well in the dewy setting of the dawn.

Mrs. Hightower was about to lie down again when suddenly another figure came within the radius of her vision. The lieutenant! She could see him quite plainly; he was nearer than the girl

on the wharf. His eyes were turned toward Molly, and he was walking quickly, with the evident intention of joining her. He stopped on the slope of the bluff. Mrs. Hightower leaned forward with interest—was he going out?

Wrexham went on with impulsive strides. Molly did not see him until his footsteps reverberated on the wharf; she stood still and watched him coming toward her. He stopped three paces away; Mrs. Hightower could see the river between them.

"I had not expected to see you again," he said. "I'm going this morning."

"This morning?" Molly repeated the words almost without grasping their meaning.

"Why not? I can't stay here and look at you; there's no good in that. You've played with me and you've thrown me over. You've made me infernally miserable, and it's not over yet, but I'm not going to stay here. You shan't have that satisfaction."

"Is that what you came to tell me?" asked Molly.

"No, I came because I couldn't keep away."

She lifted her eyes to his.

They did not see a little figure running along the edge of the bluff. It was Robert. "Mr. Wrexham! Mr. Wrex—ham!"

The two on the wharf turned.

"Mama says you won't have time for your breakfast."

The lieutenant waved the messenger away. "I don't want the breakfast." He looked again at Molly, but this time she did not meet his glance.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To France."

"To France? I thought you had the appointment in London."

"I declined that last night."

"Isn't that rather foolish?" asked Molly, and yet she was rejoicing in her heart in spite of the terror that the name of France can strike.

"Of course it's foolish," he cried out, "but who cares? I mailed the letter, too, in the little cracker-box back on the road. If I get killed, so much the better, I dare say, and if I don't—" He stopped.

The ten-minutes whistle sounded from the trolley-car.

"I'll catch that," he said, but still he did not move. The railing trembled beneath his hand.

"Good-by, Molly," he said very low.

"Good-by," Molly answered. He could scarcely hear her.

"Won't you look at me," he said.

She raised her eyes and a wave of tenderness toward him almost swept away her resolve. He was pale, and something of his youth had left his face. Tears blurred Molly's sight. That she should send him thus to France! Yet what should she say to him, since she would not venture upon the uncertain future that his nature offered?

"Don't forget me," she faltered.

"I shall try to, but I won't," he answered.

"I shall remember you all my life," said Molly. The words seemed so inadequate.

The whistle sounded again from the trolley.

He saw her tears, he understood much that she had not said.

"When the war is over," he began.

"Make no promises," she said. Somehow it seemed so much fairer that he should be free.

"I'm coming back, if I can," he finished, in spite of her interruption.

She nodded, for suddenly her throat tightened and she could not speak.

"Good-by," said the lieutenant softly once more.

"Good-by," said Molly. Her lips barely framed the words.

He knew that her heart was rent, yet her reserve inspired his own. He bowed and left her. He could not have told how he did it, except that he was possessed by some sort of ill-defined fancy that he could reach her best by way of France.

Mrs. Hightower saw him go; she watched him run down the road. He caught the car just as it was moving off.

"But what about Molly?" said Mrs. Hightower.

The red sweater was still out upon the wharf. It was a glorious morning. The full splendor of the sun was streaming from on high, but to Molly it seemed that the joy of life itself had departed—the touch of scarlet had disappeared.

Robert broke the news along the bluff. "Mr. Wrexham's gone!"

"Without telling anybody good-by?" Celia exclaimed.

"He told Molly good-by," said Robert.

Mrs. Hightower said nothing. She had seen that parting. It had been conducted at arm's length; that fact had impressed her.

"I'm afraid that young man has treated Molly rather shabbily," she remarked later.

"Suppose you put it the other way," Weldon suggested pointedly. He had not intended to speak of his last meeting with Wrexham, but, under the circumstances, it seemed best that he should do so.

Mrs. Hightower's face broke into a smile. "Well, who would have thought it? Good for Molly," she cried.

"Poor Molly, I don't believe she's enjoying her triumph," said Celia.

"Most victories are dearly won," Mrs. Hightower remarked. There was a gentle expression on her face, though, for she had had victories of her own, and she had paid for them, too. She wanted to see Molly, but they did not meet for several days. Then, one afternoon, just at dusk, they had an unexpectedly pleasant hour together.

Celia and Weldon had gone for a walk, and Mrs. Hightower was finding her own company decidedly depressing when Molly ran in. She wanted to see Celia, and she hesitated at the door when she saw that Mrs. Hightower was alone.

"Come in, come in," said the lady, her hospitality a trifle eager in its insistence. "We'll have a lamp and be more cheerful."

"Please don't, I love the dusk," said Molly quickly.

"That's because you are young and happy," the other remarked.

Molly said nothing; she wondered whether Mrs. Hightower did, indeed, think her happy. She had given the lady credit for keener powers of observation.

"We haven't seen you in some time."

"No, I've been busy," Molly answered evasively.

"What have you been doing?"

"The same old things," she said, in a weary tone.

Mrs. Hightower made no comment upon the weariness. "This place is quite idyllic, but it's too much out of the world. Give me life," she exclaimed.

"I expect to live and die here," said Molly.

"It's time for you to leave it then, if you have arrived at that decision," the other said briskly.

"I love it; I don't want to leave it." Molly spoke with more emphasis than she had yet employed; her manner was slightly defiant.

Mrs. Hightower followed the processes of the girl's thought, though she was apparently absorbed in her own reflections as she looked into the fire. "It doesn't do for a girl who amounts to anything never to see the world, Molly."

"I'm afraid of the world," said Molly in sudden confidence. "I'd never fit into it."

"Oh, it's not so difficult as you imagine. Tackle it with poise and you'll find it simple enough. Besides, it's interesting."

Molly said nothing. Probably life in the world—

the gay world—would be interesting. This place wearied her. Much as she loved it, much as she felt herself akin to it, part of its earth and air, it oppressed her with a sense of inanition.

“Why don’t you try a taste of something more lively and see how you like it?” Mrs. Hightower asked.

“Oh, no,” said Molly. She did not have energy enough to make the effort.

“Come with me, as I suggested before.”

“I couldn’t,” said Molly. “You’d find me so dull you’d send me home.”

“No danger of that. It’s just your selfishness that’s standing in the way.”

Molly laughed a little. “How do you make that out?”

“Well, I’m a bad-tempered old woman—not an ideal companion. I think we’d get on, though, for I’ve taken a fancy to you, Molly.”

“I wonder why?” said Molly meditatively.

“I can’t tell you. Those things are past finding out, but I think this has something to do with your back-bone,” Mrs. Hightower replied.

Molly looked up quickly. Just what did that mean? Mrs. Hightower, however, was continuing her remarks very placidly. There was evidently no double meaning in her words.

“You know I admired it from the first, because it’s like my own,” she said with a laugh.

Molly felt that she was seeing a very kindly and gentle side of Celia’s aunt—one not presented gen-

erally, either—and she responded with a genuine feeling of liking.

Mrs. Hightower leaned forward and put her hand over Molly's. "Come with me, and let's take a season together; it will do us both good."

Unexpectedly Molly found that she was going to agree. There was no reason why she should not do so. She hesitated, and looked up. "When?" she asked uncertainly.

"Right away. I'm tired of vegetating."

"But what about Miss Northrup?"

"She can send for her friend Emily Lovell again to keep her company, or, better still, marry John Weldon before we go. But as for us, Molly, we'll put to sea."

Molly got up and stood by the fire thinking. It might not be a bad thing to learn the ways of the world. If she should ever go to London——

"I'll go, Mrs. Hightower," she said, and she turned with a movement of sudden decision.

The full moon was rising as she went home. A great ball of pale gold, it shone above the marsh.

Somewhere beyond the boundary-line of woods that had shut in her young life, lay the world, where she and Mrs. Hightower were going, and there, to the east, just beneath the moon, was France.

9/10

